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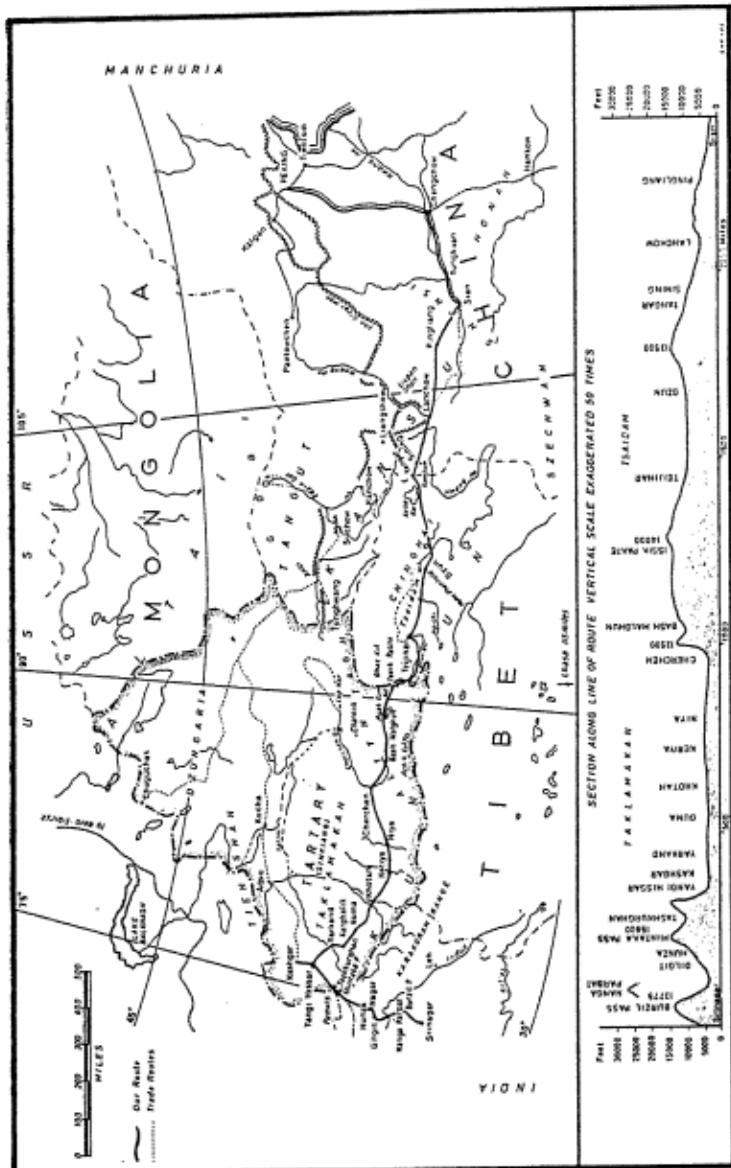
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WITH PETER FLEMING IN TARTARY



*Adventures in Geography Series*

*Editor: Nina Gardner*

WITH PETER FLEMING

*in*

# Tartary

*by*

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67263

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# I

## *Introducing Tartary*

THE Chinese have a proverb: "The longest journey starts with but a single step". And they should know, for they were among the world's first great overland travellers. They were a great civilization—the oldest in the world—a thousand years before we ourselves even appeared on the map! Two thousand five hundred years ago, Chinese merchants were dispatching their great caravans loaded with silk and porcelain, jade and lacquer and other rare products of their genius and industry westwards, ever westwards, from the Orient. And at length they reached Europe, to excite the wonder and desire of people who had never dreamed such wares could exist.

These were stupendous overland journeys, covering thousands upon thousands of miles and lasting sometimes for years between start and finish. There were no roads; until the pioneer caravans had worked their arduous way westwards there were not even tracks. There were windswept plateaux, there was

endless desert, there were ancient, dried-up river-beds, there were great mountain ranges. There were sand-dunes growing a thin, tough camel scrub; there were naked rocks split and fractured by the cruel heat of the burning sun and the intense cold of frost and blizzard. But there were no roads, no signposts, nothing to show that anyone had ever passed that way before—except the skeletons of animals that had collapsed and been abandoned in the desert or mountain pass to die, and the skeletons, too, of their drivers who, in spite of their toughness and great powers of endurance, had died of exhaustion, exposure, or thirst. No man, when he set out westwards from his home in the kindlier eastern part of China, could be certain that he would ever see his home and loved ones again.

Since those pioneering caravans passed that way, two thousand five hundred years ago, there have been many such overland journeys made by travellers whose thirst for adventure and discovery was a driving-force that enabled them to overcome all obstacles, all dangers, and eventually to arrive. The journey never became an easy one, for the territory through which it had to be made has never changed, never become kindlier, never relented towards the traveller.

This fact was proved, less than thirty years ago, when that dauntless traveller, Peter Fleming, set out on one of his great journeys, from Peking, in Eastern China, to Srinagar, in Northern India: a journey of more than 3,500 miles, most of them along the ancient route of the first Chinese caravans. Peter Fleming has travelled, and lived, dangerously in many parts of the world. In Brazil, for instance, about which he wrote his fine book, *Brazilian Adventure*. But he has never travelled more courageously, more resourcefully, nor written about his travels more splendidly, than he did on this great journey, about which he wrote his book, *News from Tartary*.

You will not find the name "Tartary" in your atlas—unless it is a very old, out-of-date one—for the name died out a century ago, giving place to Mongolia, especially Inner Mongolia; and especially, too, that portion of Inner Mongolia today known as Sinkiang, or Chinese Turkestan. Peter Fleming, of course, knows as well as anyone that the name "Tartary" is not on modern maps; but he chose to use it in his title, *News from Tartary*, and he chose wisely. For it is a good name. Though geographers and ethnographers refer to the nomadic peoples through whose territory he passed as "Mongols", their ancestors were the Tartars, the men who owed allegiance first to the



great and ruthless Genghiz Khan and later to his grandson, Kublai.

The Tartars, under a succession of great and ruthless leaders, dominated China during the early Middle Ages and maintained a reign of terror. Their rule covered the whole vast region that extended between the Sea of Japan and the River Dnieper. They were born horsemen, and grouped together in great bands, swift, unpredictable and cruel. Their home was the great Mongolian Plateau—a chain of plateaux interrupted here and there by near-impassable mountain ranges.

It was, then, and remains still, a vast, empty, desolate region, almost entirely devoid of trees, blistered in summer by an unbearably hot sun and made equally unbearable in winter by the incessant ice-cold winds that sweep over it. Such changes of climate made it necessary for the inhabitants of the plateaux to be constantly on the move, in search of pasture for their flocks and herds; in search, too, of sufficient water.

So the Mongol-Tartars grew up the hard way, it was not a creed of "Live and let live" but one of "Each man for himself, and the Devil take the hindermost!" While most European and Mediterranean peoples became seafarers on account of their abundant

coastline and the comparative ease of coastline travel, the Tartars became expert and untiring horsemen. Horses were their means of locomotion over the vast windswept steppes and plateaux on which they made their ever-changing homes.

The hard life made them into hard men. To exist at all, they had to fight, plunder, ravage, destroy. They gained a reputation for brutality, for destructiveness, that created terror wherever rumours of their movements penetrated. Across the great sweep of plateau and desert where they ranged at will, some of the caravan routes passed; and the men of those caravans knew well that if the hordes of Tartars descended upon them, they would be wiped out to a man.

It was Genghiz Khan who knit together the scattered communities of Tartars and shaped them into an all-conquering force, and he did it in a curious manner. His father, a Mongol named Yesukai, was absent from home, fighting a Tartar chieftain named Temuchin, when he himself was born, in A.D. 1162. Yesukai returned home victorious, to find a son had been born to him. Eagerly he picked him up, and saw in the palm of the baby's right hand a blood-clot that looked like a precious blood-red stone. Being superstitious, he believed this to be a symbol of

victory, so he named his baby son after the Tartar chieftain he had just slain, and knew that he would be victorious henceforth in all his wars.

Temuchin succeeded his father as emperor over the Mongols when he was still only thirteen years old. Under him, as under his father, the fighting forces were victorious everywhere. Proudly, he took to himself a new name: Genghiz Khan. It meant, quite simply, "Great and Perfect Warrior".

Genghiz Khan soon established his Tartar Empire in North China. Then he turned south and west, and little by little conquered the whole of Asia between Lake Balkash in the west and Tibet in the south. He conquered all the territories of the Indus and the Persian Gulf, Georgia, and the Caspian Sea; when he died, his empire stretched from Korea to Bulgaria: no mean record for a lifetime of sixty-odd years!

It is through this vast stretch of inhospitable, dangerous country that the so-called "Silk Road" ran. The Silk Road—so named because it came to be the most important of the desert and mountain routes along which the Chinese silk caravans passed—came into being as roads anywhere in the world always come into being: by trial and error. You have only to look at any field where sheep are grazing to realize how quickly a path can be beaten out by those tiny

feet. A dog, if it goes frequently and regularly from one point to another, perhaps across a lawn or a corner of the garden, will soon establish a recognizable track. And it was just this process that operated in the early days of the camel trains.

Because the one absolute essential to life is water, the caravans had to make sure that they were never too far from a fairly reliable source of supply. This meant that gradually, by a painful and often fatal experimenting, the trails were developed between each oasis and the next. The water found in them might be brackish, muddy, foul-smelling, stagnant, filled with ugly small water-insects—undrinkable by modern standards; but it was water; and water meant life.

The limitless leagues of emptiness through which these camel trains journeyed, month after month, were an uneven thread on which these oases were strung like precious beads. Between them, the trail meandered, skirting the mountains as long as possible, picking the least formidable of the passes when a mountain range had to be negotiated; the men and animals on the trail could comfort themselves with the thought that when they were obliged to leave the plains, the deserts, the interminable scrub-bearing sand-dunes, to climb to a mountain pass, at least

there would be water at hand. For many of the mountains are so lofty that they carry glaciers on their upper slopes, and glacier water is cool, refreshing, life-giving.

At last the camel train would reach a meeting-point which, perhaps because of the abundance of good water, had become a sort of junction where men could meet, rest, exchange information, perhaps do a little bartering on the side, and then continue on their long journey with new heart. For a short while the laden camels could kneel down, spreading their bellies on the dusty ground, relieved of the weight of merchandise they had carried for days, weeks, months. Through the nose of each passed the wooden peg that served as a "bit"; the rope that linked camel to camel, from nose-peg to tail, however, would be removed, so that for a few hours at any rate the camel's rubbery nose would be spared the incessant tug-tug-tug of that rope, and its sides and flanks be spared the sharp prod of the camel driver's goad.

These great camel trains beat out the ground between oasis and oasis, the splayed-out feet of the animals being as effective, in their thousands, as any steam-roller of today would be. Trails such as the Silk Road, and others hardly less important, endured for centuries; indeed, a few of them may still be

picked out today—two thousand five hundred years after they were first beaten out of the hard and barren soil.

The Silk Road, for instance, started in the eastern part of China as just a number of minor trails leading westwards from the various centres where the Chinese silkworm and the silk-spinning industry had been developed. They converged gradually; and for two good reasons. One was that there was, as the proverb says, "safety in numbers", and the camel trains wasted as little time as possible in joining forces; the other was that a mighty river had to be crossed before the real journey, of some thousands of miles, could begin.

The river was the famous Hwang Ho, "The Yellow River", so called because it runs a turbid yellow colour deriving from the enormous quantity of fine yellow dust that its waters carry in suspension. The Hwang Ho is not merely China's second greatest river, it is one of the world's dozen greatest. It passes through the city of Lanchow, which sprawls astride both banks. For many centuries, in fact until quite modern times, the Hwang Ho could only be crossed on the famous 600-foot-long "Bridge of Boats". It was over this bridge of boats that the silk caravans passed; this was the threshold of their immense

journey westwards into what was, for the majority of the camel drivers, the Great Unknown.

Living as we do, in a little country, it is difficult to appreciate the immensity of the territory through which those caravans had to pass. Figures in miles and square miles are hard to appreciate when they reach the amplitude of a country the size of China.

China is *half as large again* as all the countries of Europe added together; it is very nearly as large as the United States of America. Yet it is not, in itself, a continent; it is just a part of Asia! To the men setting out along the Silk Road it must have seemed as though the whole of the rest of their lives would have to be spent journeying, interminably journeying, towards the setting sun; and always with the knowledge, gleaned from those who, miraculously, had returned, that the sun would be setting behind the highest mountains in the world—mountains which must be crossed before their journey ended!

They knew, too, that a vast desert stretched along the northern margin of the Silk Road, the dreadful Gobi Desert. To cross this desolate waste of sand and rock, almost entirely waterless, the distances between the rare oases too great for even the most enduring camel to undertake unless water was carried in skins on its back, would be to invite almost

certain death. The Gobi Desert is as large as all Scotland: a fearsome territory through which to attempt to beat out a westward trail. South and west of it extends another desert, not quite so extensive but formidable enough, the Ordos Plateau, across which runs the Great Wall of China, zigzagging for hundreds of challenging miles. Camel men knew better than to attempt to cross that stretch of desolation.

All the same there were, and may still be seen, tracks and camel trails even there. Where the great Yellow River flowed there must of course be water, even if it is yellow-grey in colour and sticky to taste. All this region, like many thousands of square miles further north in China, is covered with a thick deposit of fine dust called *loess*—blown by the great winds from the deserts during thousands of years past. Sometimes it is hard; more often it is soft. In the Hwang Ho valley, between Shensi and Shansi, the passing of camel trains and men for centuries has resulted in the gradual cutting of deep ravines, worn away by the incessant plodding of big, splayed feet. Sometimes the sides of these ravines are nearly a hundred feet high, and almost vertical.

These are the famous "sunken roads"—like the sunken lanes of Devon multiplied twenty, thirty



times over. If you mount a camel and journey along one of these sunken roads in the Hwang Ho valley you will often find that the steep sides have been cut and hollowed out into caves and whole families are living in them like troglodytes. Down some of these sunken roads men and camels passed in order to join westward-bound caravans at the beginning of their hazardous journey.

The Silk Road really does not start, fully established, before Lanchow, on the Hwang Ho. But the men and camels who grouped themselves together at Lanchow will, many of them, have travelled three hundred miles already, in small groups, from the smaller town of Siking. Westwards of Lanchow, the Silk Road runs through the province of Sinkiang, also known as Chinese Turkestan—and once known as part of the great Empire of the Tartars.

Do not imagine, though, that because Sinkiang is called a province it is small, like an English county. Far from it! Chinese Turkestan covers nearly 700,000 square miles—which means that it is as large as England, France, Germany, Italy and Spain all put together! For all its size, however, it is very sparsely populated. The majority of its inhabitants are grouped together into a handful of small townships built near the few reliable oases. You may travel

for many days, even weeks, on end through this province and not encounter another living soul: a lonely country, if ever there was one!

Through it, to the great mountain ranges that constitute the barriers to India, Persia, Russia and other points westwards, runs the Silk Road. Much of it has been obliterated by sandstorms, by the eternal and unpredictable shifting of sand-dunes, by the erosive action of mighty winds, by the changing positions of river-beds and the drying up of former lakes. It is a road some two thousand five hundred years old; it was trodden by a European for the first time when young Marco Polo, the Venetian, travelled eastwards along it in the thirteenth century; and it was trodden again, less than thirty years ago, by Peter Fleming and a companion. It is largely of that journey that this book tells.

*Tea Bricks and Tsamba*

PETER Fleming's companion was a Swiss named Ella Maillart, herself an experienced and intrepid traveller, a skier of repute, a yachts-woman respected wherever men sail small boats in open water, and one who sought adventure and hardship for their own sake. He pays just tribute to her all along the line.

They picked up the Silk Road at Siking, where for centuries the long-distance caravans had converged for the journey to Lanchow before crossing the Hwang Ho on the Bridge of Boats and setting off into the unknown. Though they were luckier than the old camel men, in that they did the three hundred miles to Lanchow on a lorry—on to which twenty-six assorted Chinese men, women and children and their baggage contrived somehow to pile themselves—their journey took them eight days, which meant an average of less than forty miles a day.

At frequent intervals their lorry became sand-bogged. Whereupon all twenty-eight passengers had

to drop to the ground and put their shoulders to the rear of the lorry to extricate it from the grip of the sand by sheer human weight. Knowing they could walk nearly as fast, on the average, as the lorry could trundle, Peter Fleming and Ella Maillart often went ahead on foot, jumping aboard when they were overtaken. At first it was fairly level going, though soft; but ahead of them, westwards, there were mountains to be climbed by way of passes 10,000 feet high. In the early stages 10,000 feet seemed a great deal; but there were passes nearly twice that height awaiting them later on!

One thing they did not see, though young Marco Polo, who had travelled that way in the opposite direction seven hundred years before them, reported having seen it: the musk-deer. This animal is still to be found in that part of Asia today, for musk is still collected there and exported as a base for various perfumes. Marco Polo, who had a keen interest in everything, and whose reports of the strange things he saw excited the wonder—and often the disbelief—of Europeans in his day, wrote in his famous *Travels*: *In this region also is the finest and most valuable musk procured. The animal which yields it is not larger than the female goat, but in form resembles the antelope. It is called in the Tartar language, gudderi.*

*Its coat is like that of the larger kind of deer; its feet and tail are those of an antelope, but it has not the horns. It is provided with four projecting teeth, or tusks, three inches in length, two in the upper jaw pointing downwards and two in the lower jaw pointing upwards, small in proportion to their length and white as ivory. Upon the whole it is a handsome creature.*

*The musk is obtained in the following manner. At the time when the moon is at the full, a bag of coagulated blood forms itself about the umbilical region. Those whose occupation it is to take the animal avail themselves of the moonlight for that purpose. They cut off the membrane, and afterwards dry it, with its contents, in the sun. It provides the finest musk that is known. Great numbers, too, are caught, and the flesh is esteemed good to eat. . .*

Peter Fleming left Lanchow, not on a lorry but—more contentedly, and conscious that the new mode of conveyance was more in keeping with the traditions of the country—on one of three mules. In a straight line the distance to Sining, the next halting-place, was about a hundred miles; but the trail now wound alongside the river and led them ever more steeply upwards into the eastern slopes of the Nan Shan, a mountain range with summits up to 18,000 feet and passes well over 6,000 feet even among the

foothills. Most west-bound travellers reckon six stages for the journey; these travellers, however, determined to knock a day off that total. By driving their mules hard, and themselves no less hard, and



Mule train on mountain trail

by doing at least one forced-march of thirteen hours at a stretch, they reached Sining in five days.

Unlike those who travelled with the big camel trains in olden times, and more recently, too, they preferred to travel light. The list of goods with which they set out would make most seasoned travellers laugh mockingly—and perhaps envy them more than a little, too. A typewriter and a supply of beads,

knives and oddments for gifts or bribes; 2 lbs. of marmalade, 4 tins of cocoa, 6 bottles of brandy, 1 bottle of Worcester sauce, 1 lb. of coffee, and 3 small packets of chocolate! Not surprisingly, therefore, during their strenuous five-day journey through the mountains to Sining they subsisted almost entirely on what is known as *kua mien*—a local variant of spaghetti strongly flavoured with red pepper!

Foot-slogging it beside their mules on the steep and stony mountain tracks, or bestriding them uncomfortably when possible, they must have rather envied some travellers they saw going eastwards. For not only were they going downhill, from the mountains to the plains, but they were travelling by water. On the Sining Ho, as sometimes on the Hwang Ho and other Chinese rivers, it is the custom to travel on rafts made of inflated ox-hides lashed together with wooden platforms on them. These rafts are poled among the rapids with long sweeps like giant oars; it takes experts, though, to handle them.

Soon after leaving Lanchow they deliberately abandoned the Silk Road for a while. The road here runs almost north from Lanchow, skirting a section of the Great Wall of China and curving westwards round the northern foothills of the Nan Shan. There was a possible short cut; and though to take short

cuts in open, little-known country can be risky, they were experienced travellers accustomed to using compasses and skilled in interpreting signs and landmarks that would mean nothing at all to amateurs. They were spurred on, too, by the knowledge that they were exerting their will over the country rather



Raft made of inflated ox-hides on frame

than bowing to its dictates. It was a risk that they were taking; but he who never accepts a risk travels a dull road indeed on life's journey!

Their route now swung almost due west. On their right-hand side, the enormous crests of the Nan Shan soared to the sky, the most easterly range of the Altyn Tagh, itself a giant outlier of the even vaster



Kunlun Shan, which marks the northern frontier of Tibet. On their left-hand side soared the peaks of the Min Shan and Bayan Kara Shan, which would soon merge into the Kunlun Shan. In the shadow of such giants they must have begun to feel that they were nearing what many travellers in Asia refer to as "The Roof of the World".

Their immediate objective, beyond Sining, was a lake, Koko Nor. This is a strange lake indeed: forty miles wide and long, it lies cupped in the mountains at a height of 10,000 feet—thrice the height of Snowdon. It is a salt lake, too, though when they came to it it was frozen over from bank to bank. To the natives it is known as the "Demon Lake", and strange stories are told about it: the sort of stories which can be very discouraging to the listeners as they sit in some small, cramped, mountain refuge, summoning up the energy to tackle the next stretch of the rugged, ill-defined and dangerous track. Perhaps Peter Fleming and his companion half wished they had not taken the short cut by way of Koko Nor but had stuck to the well-tried Silk Road; but if they did, there is no hint of it in the books they both wrote about their journey.

They did linger a little while at Sining, within the security of its walls, before setting forth again. There

they found camel caravans and other travellers who had come in along other mountain trails—from the notorious Tsaidam Depression, even from Tibet itself—and there was chaffering and bartering and exchange of news and gossip, information about



Camel caravan men in traditional garb

routes completed and questions about routes yet to be tackled: all the give-and-take that is usual among chance-met acquaintances and followers of kindred occupations.

It is cold on those windswept, barren uplands and

the caravan men were dressed in the traditional garb which has hardly changed at all over the centuries. Enormous sheepskin coats, worn with the wool inside, hung to their knees. A belt, or broad sash, gathered the coat loosely round the waist, forming great folds into which all their smaller possessions, their personal belongings, could be thrust and carried with safety. Heavy, padded high boots protected their feet, and into the tops of these they slipped their long pipes with small metal bowls and mouthpieces of jade: pipes which these nomads treasured and carried with them everywhere. Hardly less precious were the leather pouch containing flint and tinder, and the sheath-knife ready to hand in the belt: a general-purpose knife, this, useful for slicing off a nicely roasted cut of meat, or slitting a sheep's throat—or the throat of an enemy!

Not far from Sining lies the Tibetan frontier. As they had decided to rest for a day or two before pressing on towards Demon Lake, they took the opportunity to visit a lamasery, or monastery. Here, at a great height among the almost impregnable mountains of the frontier, the Buddhist priests lived their strange lives. But like monks the world over, they were glad to welcome visitors from the outside world, and it was here that the travellers tasted for

the first time on their long journey the traditional dish, *tsamba*.

It looked to them, at first sight, like a rather dirty sort of powdered sugar. On second thoughts, perhaps it was grey salt. On more careful examination they came to the conclusion that it was some of the fine grey ash used by Tibetans and others as fuel in their small, portable stoves. It was heaped in a pyramid, and laid before them together with the tea and slabs of butter that the Mongols and Tibetans and others in Central Asia always put in their tea.

In fact, of course, it was none of these things. It was not even fine sawdust—another of their guesses! It was parched barley-meal, the staple diet of the inhabitants of those empty regions. At first taste they felt it was going to prove quite uneatable. But the old saying, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do", applies equally to Chinese Turkestan and Tibet, and they remembered it in time.

In fact, they realized sooner than might have been expected just what an excellent food *tsamba* is; and, incidentally, how many ways there are of eating it. They tipped it into the wooden bowls in which their steaming hot tea was made; they mixed it with butter, or with melted mutton-fat; they poured tea into their bowls, then melted rancid butter in the tea, and then

sprinkled the *tsamba* over the surface; they made it into a thin paste, or kneaded it into a firm dough. For months on end as they travelled they had *tsamba* for breakfast, *tsamba* for dinner and *tsamba* for their evening meal. They varied the taste of it, meal by meal, by tipping salt into one lot, sugar into another, pepper or vinegar, or even a dollop of their precious Worcester sauce, into yet another; they even tried a spoonful or two of cocoa, on occasion. And the effect, of course, was that they enjoyed a different menu with every meal!

One of the first things a traveller in any country other than his own must learn is to take for granted the customs and habits and food that have been traditional there for years, even for centuries. Some travellers—Peter Fleming for instance—do this automatically. There is much in his book about the meals they had, and enjoyed. Other travellers, before and since, have commented on the foodstuffs to be sampled in Chinese Turkestan—which has varied little if at all since the name Tartary disappeared from the atlas. The food is there: you must eat it whether you like it or not, for the only alternative is—to starve to death.

Another favourite dish, enjoyed today by the camel men as it was, maybe, a thousand, two

thousand years ago, looks as much as anything like the bread-sauce eaten here at home with turkey at Christmas time. But though it looks as ordinary as bread-sauce, it is in fact something richer and more exotic altogether; so elaborate, and so satisfying, indeed, that the Chinese refer to it as *pao-peitung-hsi*—which is their word for “a precious thing”. There is hardly a caravan, large or small, trailing across these dusty plains where it is not to be found.

The recipe is an elaborate one. First, take some bread that has been allowed to age until it has gone mildewed and begun to smell strongly. Wet this, and wait until it ferments. When the mildew is thick and cheese-like, put the bread out in the sun and wind to dry again. Then mix with the mildewed, fermented bread anything which will strengthen its taste. For example: bean-curd, bean-sauce, ginger, red and green peppers. Then obtain as much mutton-fat as possible, and also a supply of minced mutton. Add to this a goodly weight of coarse salt. Pound all this together. The result, in time, will be a thick paste. This can be packed into a wide-mouthed wicker jar and will be easy to carry on a camel's or mule's back.

Tea is an essential in this part of China, as in most of Asia. You will have heard the saying: “I wouldn't do (something-or-other) for all the tea in China”.

Tea is, in fact, drunk in enormous quantities throughout that vast country. It is drunk morning, noon and night, by the gallon, wherever a group of camel drivers, mule drivers and other travellers break their journey to rest or barter their goods.

To carry sufficient tea for these endless tea-drinking bouts, if it was made up in the neat quarter-pound packets we know at home, would of course be impossible. So the Chinese nomad carries it in the form of "bricks": heavy slabs of highly-compressed tea leaves that can be broken up at need and occupy relatively little space on an animal's back. It is used as currency. Sheep, cattle, wool, or other commodities are often paid for in tea bricks, or part-bricks, according to their estimated value. Every dealer or merchant will have his pair of scales with which to weigh out the amount of compressed tea agreed upon between himself and his customer.

When the caravans enter the real desert area—which occupies so much of the territory through which the Silk Road and other trails run—the quality of the water deteriorates badly and becomes almost impossible to drink unless it is made into strong-tasting tea. Many of the wells and smaller oases dry up entirely; others become heavily tainted with salt and soda and various mineral deposits.

Among the worst-tasting wells are those in the sand-dunes in which the tamarisk manages to maintain a precarious life. The tamarisk has learned to sink deep roots in search of underground supplies of moisture. But some of the roots begin very soon to rot, and in rotting turn the water into a vilely smelling, sticky and thoroughly repulsive fluid which is only just drinkable when it has been boiled and had large quantities of tea and other ingredients with a dominant taste tipped into it.

Obviously, though, the traveller must become accustomed to the food and drink that constitute the staple diet of the nomad, since the alternative is such an unpleasant one! Obviously, too, on a journey as long as the one Peter Fleming and Ella Maillart made, in which they spent seven eventful months and covered 3,500 miles, there is ample opportunity to accustom oneself to almost anything!



### 3

## *Camel Caravan*

**J**UST west of Sining, when they returned from the lamasery, they found that a big westwards-bound caravan consisting of some two hundred and fifty camels was preparing to set off. Quickly they bought camels for themselves, to carry their baggage and gear, and a couple of sturdy Tibetan ponies for their personal use. They had slept under a roof for the last time for perhaps several months of desert and mountain-trail journeying, and so went to the bazaar to lay in necessities.

In the desert a traveller must be completely self-supporting. If his pony casts a shoe, it must be replaced, but there is not a smithy to be encountered every few miles—or even every few hundred miles. Meals have to be cooked, and this means a portable brazier. The brazier requires fuel. Pots and pans are necessary. A well-stocked medicine chest is an essential. Spare sheepskin boots, blankets, ground-sheets, a tent. Water-containers to be refilled at the oases. Even if, like these two travellers, you want to

travel light, the list is a considerable one. And there is no room for luxuries.

They bought four Bactrian camels—the breed best suited to the rigours of the territory through which they would be passing. On to them they loaded sacks of grain for the ponies, barley for the *tsamba* they would be eating daily for many weeks to come; and flour, rice, sugar, salt, onions and garlic to relieve the monotony of the diet. The nearest they came to including luxuries was when they added a bag of raisins and some dried apples: they would be a delicacy for rare occasions—perhaps a useful gift.

The camel caravan was almost complete. In essentials it was exactly like the thousands that had trodden out the desert trails in the past, for the deserts and limitless sand-dunes of Central Asia do not change fundamentally, and no better mode of transport for such territory has yet been found than the strong, patient, enduring if somewhat temperamental Bactrian camel. It moves slowly, averaging neither more nor less than two-and-a-half miles an hour; but it can carry up to three hundredweight of merchandise, provisions and equipment, and seems able to travel as well with such a load on its back as unloaded.

Though Koko Nor, the Demon Lake, is 10,000

feet above sea-level it lies on a plateau of sand-dunes, rank herbage and desolate scrub. It was spring when the caravan came to it, yet heavy snow was sweeping across the plateau, borne on a vicious head wind, and the camels' shaggy hair was soon plastered with icicles. In strings of half a dozen or a dozen, nose-peg to ropy tail, they ploughed across the nightmare landscape, their drivers crouching behind them in a hopeless attempt to find shelter from the bitter wind and icy snow.

One thinks of desert as greyish-brown or dirty-yellow sand; so this was—but overlaid with a thin, freezing mantle of unexpected snow. The travellers were bitterly disillusioned, but the camel men, who had spent their whole lives on caravan trails like this, found nothing unexpected in it. The Demon of Demon Lake doubtless cackled with malicious glee as he watched the caravan vanishing into the blizzard, seeking the lower ground of the Tsaidam Depression, even though this would be leading them to the fringe of the real desert.

Trading caravans like this usually set off each day before dawn. Each day a stage must be covered, a stage rarely exceeding twenty miles—which at the camels' rate of progress means about eight hours' travelling. Sometimes, though, the caravan sets off

in late afternoon and ends its stage around midnight. In this way the worst of the heat and dryness of the day can sometimes be avoided. But this alternative depends on the presence or absence of moon and stars and so cannot be relied upon.

At this grinding rate, and in these grim conditions, Peter Fleming travelled in this 250-beast caravan for nearly three weeks. Perhaps the dominant impression was of the incessant wind. It blew—as winds always seem to do—straight in their faces, carrying the icy breath of the Kunlun Shan, the Karakoram, the Tien Shan and the Pamirs in its vicious teeth. It was inescapable, as every traveller through Central Asian deserts always finds: it is the unceasing wind that since the beginning of time has been whipping off the surface of the deserts and spreading it hundreds, thousands, of miles away in the form of *loess*, the characteristic feature of many thousands of square miles of Inner and Outer Mongolia, of Chinese Turkestan, of Tartary.

Do not imagine it simply as a sprinkling of dust a few inches thick, such as may be found on a country lane that has not had tarmac laid on it. The *loess*, this greyish-yellow dust, is hundreds of feet in thickness; even, in places, several thousands of feet thick. Carried on the prevailing westerly winds, it

has levelled out the hollow places, filled in what once were valleys and piled up against the western foothills of the mountain ranges. That is one reason why, as photographs show, the mountains seem to rise so suddenly from almost billiard-table plateaux. The ground is level to their bases, and they emerge from it, soaring upwards to great heights, sheer and menacing; their peaks may be 15,000, 18,000, 20,000 feet above sea-level, while the plateaux from which they erupt may lie midway up their precipitous slopes.

Every camel driver, every member of a caravan, knows that the best moment of the day comes when a halt is called and preparations for the night are begun. The oasis is the focal point. As close as possible to it, the camels are made to kneel down and their 350-lb. loads removed. The tents are pitched, all with their openings facing eastwards so that there is some protection from the prevailing westerly wind. Camel loads are stacked close to them to add protection, a solid rampart on the windward side of the tents. The camel men go off in search of dung for fuel, lugging it back to camp in the folds of their huge, knee-length sheepskin coats. Braziers and cooking-fires are lit inside the tents, containers of water are balanced over them, tea bricks brought out

to be chipped with the general-purpose knives, slabs of rancid butter prepared for immersion in the tea. Thus have caravan men always set about their evening meal: it is a tradition they see no good reason to break.

Among the mountains, the trail the camel caravan had been following had undulated between 10,000 and 13,000 feet. Gradually, however, it began to drop as it approached the Tsaidam Marsh. There were occasional tracks of animals. The footprints of a bear surprised the travellers. There were antelope in plenty, and the camel men took their long, old-fashioned and unwieldy muskets and shot them whenever they could, to supplement their monotonous diet. The sound of wolves awakened them at night. There were wild duck, geese, herons and mandarin duck in the marsh, though it was many thousands of feet above sea-level. An occasional wild ass was spotted, but was not worth the trouble of pursuing. Especially since the big caravan was almost at the end of the main stage of its journey. Now it was to break up, and small groups of camels and their drivers were going to pick up new and smaller trails in various directions.

The Tsaidam stretches for some five hundred miles from east to west, squeezed between the Nan

Shan and the even higher mountain range to the south. It is marshy country, infested by mosquitoes of great size and voracious appetites from which in the hot weather no European can escape, though the natives, thicker-skinned and acclimatized, do not seem to notice them. Luckily for the travellers just then, there was still snow in the northward-facing hollows and only a few pioneering mosquitoes had taken wing.

In addition to the marshland there are salt-flats, sand-dunes and scrub tamarisk, some of it growing to the remarkable height of ten or twelve feet where water is relatively plentiful. The fact that the water there is brackish and poisonous-smelling may worry travellers, but is no worry to the tamarisk at all: its roots thrive on foul water, and contribute to the foulness of the water at the same time!

Even though at first sight a region like the Tsaidam may seem comparatively hospitable beside the mountain trails and the barren, waterless desert, its whole character can change in a matter of hours or less. For here the surrounding mountains seem to have a malignant influence over the wind. Without any warning, air that has hitherto been calm is suddenly whipped up into whirlwinds, and the

"dust-devils" familiar to desert travellers the world over are born in an instant.

Tall pillars of wind-borne sand, often rising to three or four hundred feet and more, are carried eastwards, revolving and spiralling as they advance, linking the terrain with the low, murky sky and making a strange moaning or whistling sound as they develop speed. Anything loose on the ground—twigs of tamarisk, dead leaves, bones, refuse, fragments of food, discarded desert boots, camel ropes—is picked up by them and absorbed into the spiralling, wind-propelled sand: as the "dust-devils" bear down on the traveller they seem curiously human, even though larger than life, and as though possessed of a malevolent desire to do the utmost damage they can. The prudent traveller darts into his tent, closes the flap securely, and prays for the "dust-devils" to pass him by.

After the break-up of the main caravan, Peter Fleming and Ella Maillart found their trail swinging slightly northwards again. In due course it would lead them back on to the Silk Road. But not without difficulty. For between where they were and the Silk Road there soared a 15,000-foot pass over the Altyn Tagh mountains; and beyond this lay the Tarim Basin and the terrible desert region known as



the Takla Makan, of which Marco Polo and all travellers since have spoken with wonder, and with respect tinged with fear. This was a journey that was to increase in hazard stage by stage, instead of gradually easing as the miles strung out behind them.

They were on their own, now. Some travellers, knowing roughly what lay ahead of them, might have been dismayed; but to be dismayed by the uncertainties of a prospect, in Central Asia, can only mean to stop journeying altogether. And that, for this small expedition of two Europeans, two Tibetan ponies and their three or four camels, was unthinkable.

They left the Tsaidam behind them and climbed once again into the mountains. Twelve stages at least, possibly as many as twenty, lay ahead of them before they could expect to find themselves among other men once more. It was the middle of May, three months since they had set out. On the map, the distance travelled looks very short indeed; the distance they had yet to travel, greater by far. The stages ahead of them would be through rougher and rougher country, and conditioned always by the possibility of water supplies—either an oasis or, among the mountains, a stream or glacier fringe.

This new stretch of trail lay in ravines, crossed

passes the lowest of which was 9,000 feet, the highest, 15,000 feet. It was much rougher, too, than the earlier sections, and because they were less handy than the experienced Mongolian camel drivers, time and time again the camel loads came adrift as the beasts stumbled and righted themselves with awkward wrenches of their bodies at the steepest parts along the trail. They learned, the hard way, the Mongol trick of using soft, straw-filled pack-saddles lashed very tightly on to each side of the camels' humps, and then lashing the boxes, jars, crates, sacks and other pieces of baggage tightly on to these.

Mountain tracks are a much greater test of a camel's ability and stamina than the desert, for which Nature seems to have specifically designed them. Every traveller who has threaded these trails between the foothills and the high passes knows how often his heart leaps into his mouth as one of his camels suddenly checks its ungainly and cumbersome stride with an abrupt jerk, sways uncertainly above a stretch of trail that is no more than bare, loose, yielding rock perhaps above a sheer drop of many hundreds of feet of emptiness. In its fear, the camel may hug too closely the upward-soaring mountain-side into which the trail has been cut; a projection of the rock will catch the rope that ties its load on

its back, and before the driver can do anything, the camel will have bounced off the rock, tipped over the edge and fallen to its death far, far below. Nor is it just the loss of a valuable camel; it will have carried with it a precious 350-lb. load of merchandise, provisions, equipment, medicines, or something else equally vital. It is a risk every traveller takes, and one against which it is almost impossible to take adequate precautions.

Westwards, ever westwards, the trail led them, rising and falling, winding among the rugged crags and over the stony, steeply-sloping edges below the peaks. There is desert, in this part of Chinese Turkestan, even at 14,000 feet. Wild asses inhabit it, though it is a mystery where they find sustenance and water. Marmots, too, inhabit it, in holes in the ground into which any hoof smaller than a camel's can easily sink, to cause the owner to break a leg and pitch its rider over its head so that he falls to his death. It is as though all Nature has combined forces, here, to choke-off the would-be traveller.

As, stage by stage, the desert comes nearer, the terrain becomes more and more forbidding. There are watercourses to be seen in many directions; but when they are hopefully approached they prove to be nothing more than ancient, dried-up river-beds,

rocky and sandy channels through which water last flowed perhaps a century ago, to be absorbed by the desert and lost for all time.

This is a part of the country where the mirage is frequently seen. No matter how often the traveller sees a mirage, he is never completely convinced that it is not, in fact, reality, but a cruel optical illusion that lures him on. Surely, he says, it *must* be water, this time? Surely those are palm trees swaying above an oasis? Surely those are tents where men are gathered together and so I shall be able to replenish my depleted stores, refill my water skins? These are the heartfelt cries that issue from him, however hard he tries to choke them down, each time that strange phenomenon, the desert mirage, confronts him.

Now the ground slopes gently downhill. But this does not mean that a camel will move any faster: its pace is a regular one, and varies little whether it is going up or down a slope. But the traveller will find it easier going when he has alighted from his mount and eased his cramped limbs. As he walks on, ahead of his camels and ponies, he looks eagerly about him, hoping for some sign that others have recently passed that desolate way before him. He learns to spot a trio of bleached stones, placed in such a way that it is obvious that they have supported

a cooking-pot above an open fire. Perhaps he bends down to see whether the stones are still warm. If they are, then maybe the other traveller is not so very far ahead after all, perhaps only just round the next bend or two of the winding trail? But if the sun is strong, it is more than likely to be simply that the stones have caught and retained its heat within themselves.

The mountains, for the time being, lay behind; the ground had now sloped downwards for a long while. The heat had increased, in spite of the wind. The traveller who has reached this point does not need to consult his map to know that he has come at last to the eastern fringe of the dreaded desert known as the Takla Makan.



Small camel caravan in the Tsaidam



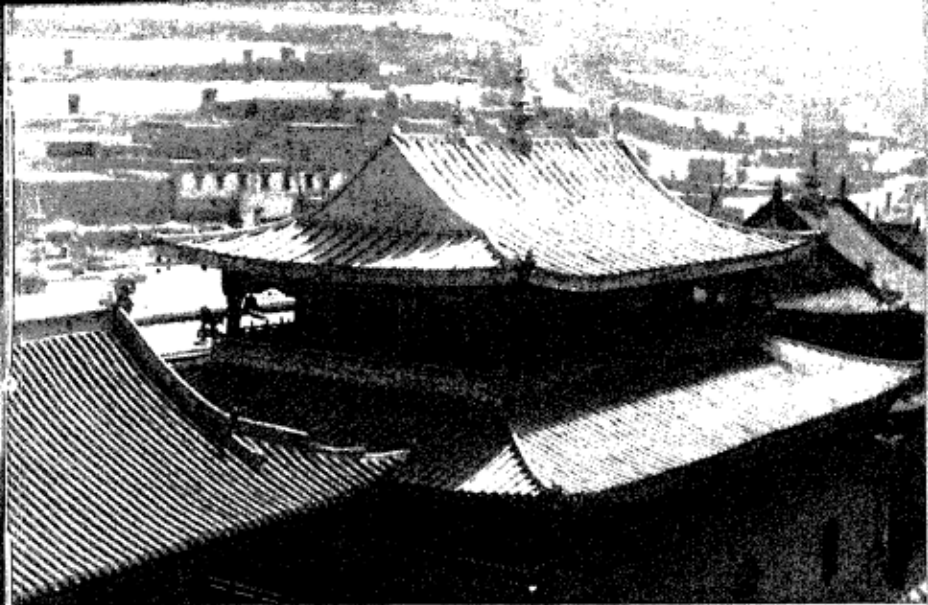
(Above) The Tsaidam: Wind-blown sand-dunes

(Below) Camel caravan in snow





*(Above)* Inn courtyard on the Old Silk Road



*(Above)* Golden roofs of the Kumbum Lamastery



*(Below)* Butcher's shop in Niya, on the Old Silk Road



*(Below)* Prayer-wheels in the Kumbum Lamastery



*(Above)* Sometimes the going is firm . . .

*(Below)* . . . sometimes it is treacherous





## 4

### *The Takla Makan*

**T**AKLA MAKAN is just one name, the local name, for a vast desert region filling more than half of Chinese Turkestan's total area. On the atlas it may appear as the Tarim Basin. The name is less important to the traveller than the conditions to be faced there.

Only the traveller who has plodded through its interminable miles of shifting sand-dunes, sandy-rocky ridges, scrub tamarisk and sheer monotony can know what it is really like to be caught up in it. It is nearly a thousand miles long, from east to west, and between three and four hundred miles wide from north to south at its widest part. It is caged-in between the enormous northern rampart of the Tien Shan—the "Celestial Mountains", as the Chinese call them—and the even more formidable southern rampart of the Kunlun Shan. Its western end merges into the foothills of the giant mountains known as the Karakorams, the "Black Mountains", and the grim Pamirs of Russian Turkestan and Afghanistan. To enter it, as these travellers did, from the east is to

enter a stifling, menacing trap, the western exit of which demands immense courage, resourcefulness and stamina.

Because it lies between the silk-producing districts of Eastern China and the hungry markets of the West, from time immemorial the caravans have had to pass through the Tarim Basin, the Takla Makan, and travellers must still pass that way. The Silk Road approaches by way of Lop Nor, one of the strangest "lakes" to be found anywhere in the world.

Once Lop Nor was a lake indeed: a source of good water, an oasis on a giant scale, the halting-place of caravans for centuries, maybe for two thousand years. Around its shores the camel men relaxed, gathering strength and courage for the great trial of endurance, the hardships, dangers, hunger, thirst and fear that they knew awaited them in the thousand desert miles that lay ahead. The pioneers of the Silk Road were lucky in their discovery; those who followed them in succeeding centuries never thought of by-passing Lop Nor, for to do so would have been suicidal.

Seven hundred years ago Marco Polo halted there, and wrote of it: *Lop is situated towards the north-east, near the commencement of the great desert. Travellers who intend to cross the desert usually halt for a*

*considerable time, as well to repose from their fatigues as to make the necessary preparations for their further journey. For this purpose they load a number of camels with provisions and their merchandise. Should the former be consumed before they have completed the passage of the desert, they kill and eat them.*

*The stock of provisions should be laid in for a month, that time being required for crossing the desert in the narrowest part. The journey is invariably over either sandy plains or barren mountains; but at the end of each day's march you may stop at a place where water is procurable: not indeed in sufficient quantity for large numbers, but enough to supply a hundred persons, together with their beasts of burden. At three or four of these halting-places the water is salt and bitter, but at others it is sweet and good. In this tract neither beasts nor birds are met with because there is no kind of food for them. . .*

Like most people of his day, Marco Polo was inclined to be superstitious. Certainly when he found himself in the desert of the Takla Makan he would be among people who were strongly superstitious—and perhaps with good reason. Sailors, who spend much of their lives in the wastes of water that cover most of the earth's surface, and nomads who live on wastelands as empty, almost, as the oceans, tend to become

more superstitious than people who live urban lives and spend most of their time in close association with their fellow men. It is not surprising that the vast emptiness of the Tarim Basin gave birth to a mass of superstition, as Marco Polo discovered and recorded: *It is asserted as a well-known fact that this desert is the abode of many evil spirits, which amuse travellers to their destruction with many extraordinary illusions. If, during the day time, any persons remain behind on the road, either when overtaken by sleep or detained by their natural occasions, until the caravan has passed a hill and is no longer in sight, they unexpectedly hear themselves called to by their names, and in a tone of voice to which they are accustomed.*

*Supposing the call to proceed from their companions, they are led away by it from the direct road and, not knowing in what direction to advance, are left to perish. In the night time they are persuaded that they hear the march of a large cavalcade on one side or other of the road, and concluding the noise to be that of the footsteps of their party, they direct theirs to the quarter from which it seems to proceed: but upon the breaking of day they find they have been misled, and drawn into a situation of danger.*

*Sometimes likewise during the day these spirits assume the appearance of their travelling companions,*

*who address them by name and endeavour to conduct them out of the proper road. It is said also that some persons, in their course across the desert, have seen what appeared to them to be a body of armed men advancing towards them, and apprehensive of being attacked and plundered have taken flight. Losing by this means the right path, and ignorant of the direction they should take to regain it, they have perished miserably of hunger.*

*Marvellous indeed and almost passing belief are the stories related of these spirits of the desert, which are said at times to fill the air with the sound of all kinds of musical instruments, and also of drums and the clash of arms: obliging the travellers to close their line of march and to proceed in more compact order. . .*

Marco Polo may not have entirely believed the stories he was told: he may have been writing "with his tongue in his cheek". But it is more than probable that he suspected the stories to be true. After all, to see a mirage is to have one's credulity strained to the uttermost; and these strange sounds, voices, music, the jangle of steel on steel, constituted a sort of aural mirage and probably had as much strength as the visual mirage that plagues all desert travellers, whether in the Sahara, the Gobi, the Takla Makan or elsewhere.

One thing he observed and reported faithfully; and no desert traveller, no pioneer in any open country, will be so foolish as to doubt what he wrote: *Travellers find it also necessary to take the precaution before they repose for the night, to fix an advanced signal, pointing out the course they are afterwards to hold, as well as to attach a bell to each of their beasts of burthen for the purpose of their being more easily kept from straggling. Such are the excessive troubles and dangers that must unavoidably be encountered in the passage of this desert. . . .*

Where the Silk Road ran, of course, this precaution he mentions—of marking the direction to be followed when the caravan resumes its journey—would not be necessary: it was well trodden, for generations of camels and their drivers had been passing along it and it remained fairly well defined even though the violent winds continuously tended to obliterate it with the sand they carried through the air. But there were other routes, less frequented; and these might have to be trodden out afresh every time a caravan was sent on such routes by the merchants whose goods were entrusted to them.

But what has happened to that lake, Lop Nor, since Marco Polo wrote of it, when it was still one of the most important halting-places anywhere along

the thousands of miles of the Silk Road? As a lake, it no longer exists! Today, as for a long time past, it is no more than a depression in the sandy soil, the dried-up bed of a former lake, fringed with salt-encrusted sand. It used to be fed by the Tarim, a river which flowed off the foothills and ran eastwards along the foot of the Tien Shan. It flows, much shrunken, still; but its sand-filled waters vanish into the great Lop Nor Depression as though sucked downwards by some vast underground suction-plant.

More recent travellers than Marco Polo have been fascinated as well as puzzled by the changes in the fortunes of this former lake at the eastern end of the Takla Makan. One of them, the great Swedish traveller and geographer Sven Hedin, who died a few years ago at the age of eighty-seven, spent much of his long lifetime among the Asian deserts and the mountains forming "The Roof of the World". He evolved a theory about Lop Nor, and spent a long time in the later years of his life attempting to prove it.

He was led to it, of course, by his interest in the Silk Road, over much of which he had travelled several times and about which he wrote a gripping book. He was puzzled to understand why this out-

standing caravan trail should have been abandoned, as it so obviously was, centuries ago, just at this particular point, while other sections of it were still in regular use. He came to the conclusion that it was simply because the lake, Lop Nor, had dried up, after first changing its position in the desert. In 1934—very shortly before Peter Fleming did his great journey—he paid a return visit to the eastern end of the Tarim Basin, and began excavating. Perhaps, he thought, the spade would lay bare a secret, solve a problem, as has so often been the case elsewhere.

The excavating led to a strange experience. Close alongside the trail which he firmly believed to have been a section of the Silk Road before it was abandoned, his keen eye detected what was apparently an artificial mound. If it was artificial, then it was man-made; if man had made it, he had had a good reason for doing so, for no one in his senses would go out of his way to dig and carry such a quantity of soil and rock in that desert country for the mere fun of it. So he argued; and promptly diverted his diggers in a new direction.

It was an easy matter to clear the loose, sandy covering of the mound. But beneath that covering they soon came to a second layer, this time as hard as concrete and calling for the use of pickaxes, not



spades. They went to work with picks and crowbars, and after hacking their way downwards for some distance, came upon a heavy, massive plank. Sven Hedin knew well that there were no trees within many hundreds of miles large enough for such a plank to be cut from it: the reason for its existence just there, then, was obviously a significant one!

They worked on, downwards; and, at his bidding, worked more cautiously than before; he watched them keenly, alert to call a halt at any moment. They came to more timber; then to an accumulation of rubble; then, below a further layer of rubble and sand, to another plank, wider this time. And beneath this, a coffin which had the shape of a dug-out canoe. The plank above it had been the coffin's lid!

Within the coffin there were draperies, still intact, but fragile and, as they found when they touched them, liable to crumble into dust. Carefully, delicately, Sven Hedin and one of his most expert assistants removed the draperies, a little at a time. And within them they found the skeleton of a woman! "She had seen," he wrote afterwards, "the garrison of the ancient oasis-city of Lou-lan dash out to do battle with the barbarians; had seen the great trade caravans of innumerable camels carrying bales of China's precious silk along the Silk Road to the

Western World. Beside her coffin was a small, square, four-legged food table, a wooden bowl, and the skeleton of a whole sheep—provisions for the traveller as she set out on her journey into the world beyond death.”

This was a strange “find” to come across in the wastes of the desert. Sven Hedin estimated that she must have been buried there at least fifteen hundred years ago, for it was his belief, after much research and collating of evidence, that the Silk Road had changed its course some time in the fourth century A.D. He may be right or he may be wrong; but in any case it is a haunting thought that for many centuries this simple wooden coffin has reposed beneath the hard, rocky soil and the over-mantle of wind-blown sand, lovingly laid there by who knows whom—parents, husband, a queen’s subjects. And the mound they built over it has stood there: a silent, patient desert milestone or landmark awaiting excavation by twentieth-century man.

## 5

### *Death in the Desert*

LOP Nor is at the eastern threshold of the Takla Makan: a point on the map, but little more than that, today. There are marshy patches here and there, where once the lake's waters delighted the parched camel man and his beast. A handful of men contrive even today to eke out a sparse livelihood near by, subsisting on a sort of fish found in the thin mud, which traps a little of the water running off the snow on the high mountains. Lopliks, these men are called: they must be about the loneliest desert dwellers in the whole world.

To the west of Lop Nor, the Silk Road divided. This is not surprising, for to cross the heart of the Takla Makan was impossible: oases in the central region are almost non-existent, and the few travellers who have penetrated part-way into it report that it is as formidable as the worst of the Kalahari or Sahara. The few oases that exist, and that are capable of providing water even for a small caravan, are only to be found at altitudes of 3,500 feet and more.

So the older caravan men, wary of committing suicide by plunging into the heart of the desert, went either north-westwards to the foot of the Tien Shan, or south-westwards to the foot of the Kunlun Shan. There was little to choose between the two: along the more northerly route they were to some extent sheltered by the mass of the Tien Shan from the bitter north wind, though they were in danger from avalanches set in motion by the sun beating down on the southern face of the mountains; if they followed the southern route, at the foot of the Kunlun Shan, they were close to some of the bleakest, most inhospitable mountains in the world.

On either route, however, they were still unable to escape one of the worst features of the Takla Makan. This is the dust haze that perpetually hangs over almost the whole of the Tarim Basin. When the air is still, this is just a nuisance, but bearable. The wind, however, blows almost continuously, and when it is blowing the dust is carried in suspension, to sweep across the trails, partially obliterating them, forming "dust-devils" that rise as high as 13,000 feet up the mountain slopes. So, there is no escaping it anywhere, either on the plain or on the mountain trails. In the desert, the choice is always a hard one, but it always has to be made.

How often must the leader of a camel caravan have stood there, to the west of Lop Nor, trying to decide between the northern and the southern route, weighing up the advantages and disadvantages, speculating about possible changes in the weather during the long days and nights that they would have to spend before they arrived—if they ever did arrive—at Kashgar, the meeting-point of the two routes at the western end of the desert.

The Tien Shan is not among the world's highest mountains. It averages no more than 16,000 to 18,000 feet—only two-thirds the height of the Himalayan giants that are today being conquered one by one. The highest peak is not much over 22,000 feet, and there are passes over the range, between the peaks, occasionally negotiated by courageous parties travelling north or south. But they are quite formidable enough.

One of them, for instance, the Muzart Pass, rises steeply to almost 12,000 feet. The trail runs for five miles sheer up a steeply-descending glacier whose surface is broken up into boulders and ice crags mixed with the hard rock the glacier has picked up on its descent from the upper ice-fields. It is seamed with great crevasses where the ice has split through its own great weight. Boulders, half rock, half ice, tower

from its surface. Some of them are as immovable as the mountain itself; others are dangerously poised on knife-edges of rock or ice, likely at any moment to be tilted out of equilibrium by a change of temperature, the collapse of supporting rock, or even by the noise of men and animals fighting their way up towards the summit of the pass.

Some sections of this pass are so precipitous that steps have to be cut in the surface of the glacier, just as mountaineers on the frozen upper slopes of the high Alps and Himalaya, where snow and ice lie all the year round, have to cut steps for themselves, laboriously hacking away with their ice-axes a few inches at a time.

This trail, of course, is impossible for camels, though some of the stout-hearted, tough and wiry little Tibetan and Mongolian ponies can tackle it. Proof that the trail is often too steep even for them is to be found in the skeletons and skulls of animals that lie in the cracks and hollows on both sides. Into these the animals tumbled, exhausted by the climb, weighed down by the loads they carried, taken un-awares by the treacherous footing beneath them. Having once fallen, it was beyond their strength, even aided by their drivers, to struggle back on to the trail. They had to be left to die where they fell,

to suffer the agonies of broken limbs, and slow death from exhaustion and exposure. This is their desert graveyard, with ice and rock instead of earth to cover them.

All the same, despite the grimness of the trail, a certain beauty is to be found there. Most travellers would be too busy forcing their hazardous passage upwards or downwards to notice it; but one recent traveller, obliged to make the passage of these forbidding mountains, has written almost with affection of what they meant to him. He wrote of how, just when the bleakness and cruelty of the mountains began to be insupportable, he might round a corner and find himself *in a little paradise of a valley with a river gambolling along its floor, a place of green slopes and woods.*

He agreed that most of the territory through which he had to pass was sterile, naked rock. But even the naked rock, he found, had a wonderful beauty peculiar to itself, though the landscape generally might be as desolate as death. *Seldom*, he wrote, *have I seen such splendour of colour as in the evenings on the southern slopes of the Celestial Mountains, when the different strata in the mountainside shone and glittered in a sunset.*

The Tien Shan are not entirely devoid of life.

Among the lower slopes there are to be found roe deer, wild sheep, gazelle and wapiti. Among the loftier peaks, where snow is permanent, there are ibex—worth travelling a long, hard way to see. Dogs, too—apparently! Several travellers have reported hearing the unmistakable barking of dogs, though they never succeeded in catching sight of one. Nor is this surprising, for the odd barking noises they heard was in fact the cry of a mountain deer-like creature, quite small, though with horns fifteen inches long, known to the natives of the region as *illik*.

The Kunlun Shan, the alternative to the Tien Shan, is a more formidable range altogether than the Celestial Mountains to the north of the Takla Makan. It runs west-east for something like two thousand miles, starting at the Karakorams, or "Black Mountains", which mark the frontier between Tartary and Kashmir, with a crest-line for the first few hundred miles well over the 20,000-foot mark, and with occasional summits, like Ulugh Muztagh, over 23,500 feet high.

But it is not just their great height and extent that make the Kunlun Shan so formidable. They have practically no passes at all; very few rivers descend their northward-facing, precipitous slopes, and those that do are almost immediately swallowed up in the



great apron of gravel and *detritus* that fans out over the desert from each mighty bastion. They rise almost sheer from the arid plain below.

No plants grow on them, save for a very, very few in the rare, sheltered tracts. For almost the whole of their tremendous length they are arid, barren, viciously eroded by the powerful chisels of frost and snow and north winds. Tibet owes her seclusion, her isolation, in very large part to the fact that she is ringed about by the Himalaya to the south and the Kunlun Shan to the north. If any travellers have written about the Kunlun Shan after an attempt to penetrate those mountain fastnesses, they will not have written with affection or approval; rather with respect tinged with wholesome fear.

The Takla Makan seems somehow to have been influenced by its towering neighbours. Not only is it arid, bitter, waterless and forbidding in itself, but it seems to echo the hostility and bleakness of the mountain ranges that frame it. The desert may be red-hot as an over-heated bread-oven at one period, and cold as Antarctica at another; sand and snow for supremacy, making of it a battlefield through which the caravan must drive its way, or perish of exposure before it can reach its destination.

Great winds funnel down it from the west, raising

dust storms that quickly obliterate trails that have perhaps been beaten out only a day or two before by the last caravan to pass that way. But the trails will remain recognizable because they will be marked by the skeletons of camels and ponies, asses and mules—and often their drivers, too—who have fallen victim to the implacable ferocity of the elements.

These, like the pathetic skeletons in the hollows beside the mountain trails, are the relics of desert traffic that has passed that way. They are the last resting-places of beasts and men who, quite simply, could go no further. The skeletons are bleached staring white, eroded by the wind-blown sand, scorched by the midday sun and frozen by ice and snow. The skulls lie upturned, their empty eye-sockets seeming to mock those who are foolhardy enough to continue to travel where they themselves were defeated. If their empty jaws held tongues, they would cry out in mockery; or perhaps warn the passers-by who hoped to succeed where they had failed. Some of the skeletons have been broken up and scattered, and huge femurs, as of prehistoric beasts, stick up like signposts in the sand, uttering silent, fearsome messages. The Takla Makan has been called "The Wilderness of Death": it could hardly have a more suitable name.

Death is always in its air, whether it is hot or cold. And superstition is there too. European travellers have reported that when they were in a camel caravan, and overtaken by exceptionally bad weather, very often even the hardy Bactrian camel would collapse in its tracks. Their drivers might make one half-hearted attempt to force them to struggle to their feet again, but that was all. For they knew that when a camel just sinks slowly to the ground like that, Death has already marked it for his own. Better, then, not to interfere, they think, and abandon it to its fate.

Travellers have come upon a camel, maybe two or three or more camels, sunk to their bellies in the desert, iced over, if snow has been driving across the sand, immobile, now, as statues carved in ice. When they have come up alongside, they have wondered whether the camel men of their own party would do anything about it. But they have very soon realized that they would not even if they could. That the camels were still alive became obvious because, as they passed them by, the half-dead camels turned their long, ungainly necks and heads, contemplating those who still lived with a melancholy eye, but uttering no sound. Though they possess, as a breed, extraordinary vitality and stamina, they were dying

there by inches, dying a slow and lingering death which not one of the superstitious camel men of other caravans would dream of attempting to alleviate by a quick shot from his musket. No; Death had taken possession of the unhappy beasts. To interfere with Death was to invite his unwelcome attentions to oneself—and there was enough hazard in life without going out of one's way to seek any more!

It was the southern branch of the Silk Road, the Kunlun Shan route, that Peter Fleming chose. Probably because already, thanks to the famous "short cut" through the mountains that he had taken this side of Lanchow, he would be dropping down on to it somewhere in the region of Charkhlik, on the way to Cherchen, and following it after that to Khotan, Karghalik and Yarkand, and so on to Kashgar, where the north and south divisions of the Silk Road came together again at the western end of the desert of death.

## 6

### *Oasis*

**B**UT he was not on the Silk Road yet. He was still high on the mountains, picking out trails that would bring them downwards as well as westwards. They were not steep, to begin with at any rate, but they were nearly always treacherous. Many of them lay in dried-up watercourses that had been cut into the mountain slopes by glacier water but had now, for some reason, become dry. But they naturally ran downhill, and must therefore lead eventually to the plain far below. Camels and camel men regularly made use of them.

They were now at a point shown on the map as the Achik Kul Tagh—a spur of the Kunlun Shan unpleasant enough even if not quite as formidable as was the enormous range from which it derived. Their trail wound downwards, sometimes gently, sometimes precipitously; at times they might have doubted whether in fact it was a recognized trail, had they not occasionally spotted in a patch of loose sand the unmistakable pad marks of camels that had

preceded them. Such a sight gave them new hope and encouragement. Every traveller who has journeyed through desolate, uncharted country knows how reassuring it is to come unexpectedly on clear evidence that the trail he is following is a recognized one: where others have been, he reminds himself, he too can go.

The mirage is a denizen of these great expanses of dry, sandy terrain, and like other travellers before him, Peter Fleming was constantly plagued by them. He and his companion came from time to time upon water-holes, but almost every one of these had long since dried up. As often as not, however, the water-hole was no more than an optical illusion. It became necessary to extend the stages from the customary seven or eight hours apiece, in which the slow-moving camels would average, hour by hour, their tedious but certain two-and-a-half miles. The distance between one supply of water and the next seemed to become greater with every stage.

On one of the marches towards the point of intersection with the Silk Road they kept going for fourteen hours. During those fourteen murderous hours they halted only three times, and never for longer than five minutes. In his book Peter Fleming remarks that it is his belief that any man, provided he can

avoid getting blisters on his heels, can walk in a day at least half as far again as he imagines he can until he is put to the test. But he must, of course, have a motive for such forced-marching, otherwise every mile, every furlong, every last yard, very soon becomes a labour and a penance. He himself must have been pretty tough to march as he did; for the country was never easy country. There was no good firm turf such as makes long-distance walking a joy; there was no smooth road, which, even if hard, can make for big distances in short times; there was only rock and sand: sand and rock from start to finish. And always—the desperate longing for water!

A traveller marching, or riding, steadily downhill, is heartened by the thought that the lower he gets the better the prospect of an oasis—somewhere, some time. So it was here. That there would be an oasis at Cherchen, at the foot of the Kunlun Shan, was not just a hope but a certainty. For Cherchen had been for centuries a halting-place for camel caravans. There would be water there sufficient not merely for a small, amateur caravan like that of Peter Fleming and Ella Maillart but for any caravan, no matter how large it might be. Caravans of two, three, four hundred camels and their drivers often met in Cherchen and lingered there while news was

exchanged and goods were bartered: for those whose whole lives are spent journeying through deserts, clocks and calendars have little meaning: the men had all the time in the world, and their beasts were in no hurry to take up their enormous, inevitable loads.

One curious thing these two travellers noted is that sometimes a completely dried-up watercourse could change, as if by a miracle, to running water—and in an unexpectedly short time. They camped, at the end of that fourteen-hour, gruelling stage, exhausted, hungry, but above all parched with thirst. Both they and their animals were, in fact, too exhausted to be interested in food, unless they could first drink. The camels, unaccustomed to such stages as the one they had just completed, were too weary even to forage for food when their loads had been removed. The trail they had been following was, once again, in the dried-up bed of what had once been a stream. But there was no sign of water: not even a drop with which to moisten their lips.

They turned in for the night. And at three o'clock in the morning were wakened by the unmistakable sound of running water. Disbelieving their own senses, they went to prospect. Yes, there was a thin trickle of pure, cool water flowing down the middle



of the trail they had been following: a trail which had been as hard and barren as broken concrete only a few hours before! Hardly daring to believe what they saw, they collected water in a kettle, and brewed tea—the longed-for cups of tea they had begun to think they might never taste again. And never, they felt, had tea tasted more delectable.

What had happened, to produce this miraculous water—more precious to them, just then, than pure gold would have been? It was a trick of temperature. In those mountains, certain streams flow only by night. The reason for this is that during the heat of the day the sun melts the top surface of the snow and ice that lie on the upper slopes. The water begins to flow: a mere trickle to being with, but gathering strength all the time. Eventually it creeps down to the level at which this caravan was travelling, and had halted for the night in despair. High up the mountain, the water had frozen into ice again; but it was still running freely, for a short time at least, on the lower slopes. It is a phenomenon of those mountains for which travellers have often had cause to be deeply grateful.

In the course of the next stage or two they dropped off the mountain altogether. When they found themselves actually on the level plain, on the fringe of the

Takla Makan, they filled up every available receptacle with water from a stream which, to their delight, ran off the foothills and was clear and pure enough to mix without having to disguise its taste with tea and rancid butter. Into the flat-sided wooden casks that the camel men use, they poured a goodly supply, filling them to the brim and making doubly sure that the openings were well stoppered: in the desert, the loss of even a mouthful of water can be dangerous.

Then, they journeyed for nine long hours over desert sand. After the hard, rough, unyielding rock of the mountain trails, the sand was even welcome,—at first. But very soon it became tiring to walk on, yielding too much to the weight of the foot, making each successive step a dragging at the muscles of calf and thigh which became an increasing misery.

For the camels, though, it was just right. Their great pads spread on the sand, giving them a firm footing at all times. For part of the time the travellers rode, to ease their aching muscles; but camel riding is not a comfortable mode of progression unless you have been brought up to it from childhood, and it was difficult to choose between the discomfort of riding and the strain of walking on sand.

Sand varies a great deal. In some great areas of desert it is hard and firm, almost as good as turf;

but in this part of the Takla Makan the sand is exceptionally soft and yielding. The pad prints of the camels were deeper by far than usual, and the trail they left behind them resembled almost the wake of a ship. When the time came to pitch the tents the sand was so soft that the tent-pegs simply vanished into it. The experienced camel men of a small caravan with which for a time they joined forces were prepared for this, and produced an armful or two of antelope horns which they used as additional tent-pegs for the guy-ropes. Without them, none of the tents would stand up to the desert wind.

There was still a stage to be covered before Cherchen was reached, and it was not a pleasant stage, either. It was necessary to climb again into the foothills, to escape a particularly bad stretch of desert going, and then to descend through a ravine to the level again. It was very empty country: not a landmark anywhere; not a water-hole to be seen; hardly even a clump of tamarisk or dried-up camel-scrub to relieve the monotony. They did another fourteen-hour stage, as a result of which the camels, unused to such forced-marching, were on the point of mutiny. What water they did find was salt and more brackish than ever; the dreaded dust-haze of the Tarim Basin hung about them like a living menace

throughout the day, whipped occasionally into life, so that they were stung perpetually by myriads of sharp, wind-borne grains, sharp as needles and penetrating as mosquito-bites.

They came, during this long stage, to the great expanse of sand-dunes about which Marco Polo had written, describing the strange, unnerving sounds which deluded travellers in the desert into thinking that they were being hailed by unseen companions or threatened by unseen enemies. To be told about such sounds by other travellers is one thing; to hear them for yourself is a very different matter! They were strange sounds indeed: not those of wind in camel-scrub or tamarisk, or of wind funnelling down a narrow, steep, rock-scattered gully, or of camels or asses or mules in distress, or of their drivers in anger. They might in fact be—well, anything!

They were true desert sounds, anyway: sounds to which any traveller across the deserts of the world eventually becomes accustomed; just as he must do to the mirages which fan his deep desire for water and rest at non-existent oases. The sounds were neither more nor less than that of wind passing through oven-hot air close above ribbed sand-dunes lying at a certain angle to the general direction of the wind.

The softness of the sand can prove fatal. When it

is as soft as this, even the Bactrian camel, with its astonishing stamina and strength, can be overcome by it. If it sinks too deeply into the sand it collapses sideways and is unable to rise to its feet without assistance. The driver must unload it, call for help from his fellow camel drivers, and practically lift it to its feet again. After which the long and laborious process of reloading must be undertaken. No camel driver leading a camel that was carrying his own property or possessions would, of course, allow it to lie and rot in the desert sand; but if the camel were not his own, if the load it carried belonged to someone else, if the sun blazed down and the stage had been long and water was scarce and the halting-place was not yet in sight: well, perhaps the story might have a different ending.

With the great oasis of Cherchen ahead of them, men and animals were stimulated to more than ordinary efforts. They did four stages in thirty-six hours, instead of, at most, two; they went without sleep, save for a snatched couple of hours or so, for a period of forty hours; and they came, at long last, to Cherchen. How many such caravans, one wonders, have been driven hard, desperately hard, over the last few stages, because of the promise of the cool water of that oasis? Hundreds, thousands, no doubt,

in the centuries since the pioneer caravan men had first beaten out the Silk Road.

Desert travellers say that Cherchen, with the possible exception of the oasis of Charklik, many stages across the desert to the north-east, is the most isolated of all the larger oases that fringe the Takla Makan. Perhaps it is for this reason that it was formerly used by the Chinese as a penal settlement: and there can surely be few penal settlements anywhere in the world grimmer than this would have been.

But to the traveller approaching it across the desert it looks, and is, a haven of refuge. Here, he tells himself repeatedly as the arduous miles drag by, will be abundant water, fresh food, perhaps fruit, freshly-killed mutton, antelope-meat, succulent melons. It will be possible to pitch a tent in the shade of a tree, sheltered by a stone wall from the everlasting and cruel wind. It may even be possible to sleep beneath a roof, within thick stone walls, and on carpets for a change. Thoughts such as these have heartened desert travellers for centuries during the interminable stages westwards across the Tarim Basin towards the mountains that tower beyond the oasis.

Exactly four months had passed since Peter Fleming and Ella Maillart left Peking. For the greater

part of that time—a hundred and twenty days and nights—they had been travelling westwards on foot, on pony-back, on mule-back, with or without camels of their own. They had crossed mountain passes rising to 14,000—15,000 feet; they had plodded



Fertile soil at last!

through sand-dunes up to 10,000 feet. Now at last they were within sight of Cherchen: and what a sight it was, even from a distance!

There was a river-bed, with deep water flowing along it; there was massed, crowded, luxuriant (by contrast with tamarisk and camel-scrub) vegetation

on its further bank; there were poplars, ash trees and mulberry trees in profusion; there was a patchwork of fields in which rice, barley and hemp were growing; there were men and women tilling the fertile soil, digging and clearing a network of irrigation-channels; there was the cheerful sound of cocks crowing, of dogs barking; there was the sound—almost forgotten in the long months during which they had been on the move—of leaves rustling in the wind; there was—and this, to two Europeans in Asia, may have seemed the strangest thing of all—the familiar if half-forgotten sound of a cuckoo calling!

Perhaps we tend to think of an oasis as nothing much more than a well in the middle of a desert, with a palm tree or two growing near by and a makeshift device for hoisting buckets of brackish, stagnant water from the muddy bottom. There are, of course, oases no large than that. But Cherchen, for all its isolation midway along the lower side of the Tarim Basin, is something more than that. A whole community lives there, as its ancestors have done for centuries past. It has seen all the great camel caravans that have followed the southern branch of the Silk Road, whether west-bound from Lop Nor or east-bound from Kashgar, pass through the oasis, lingering to summon strength for the continuation



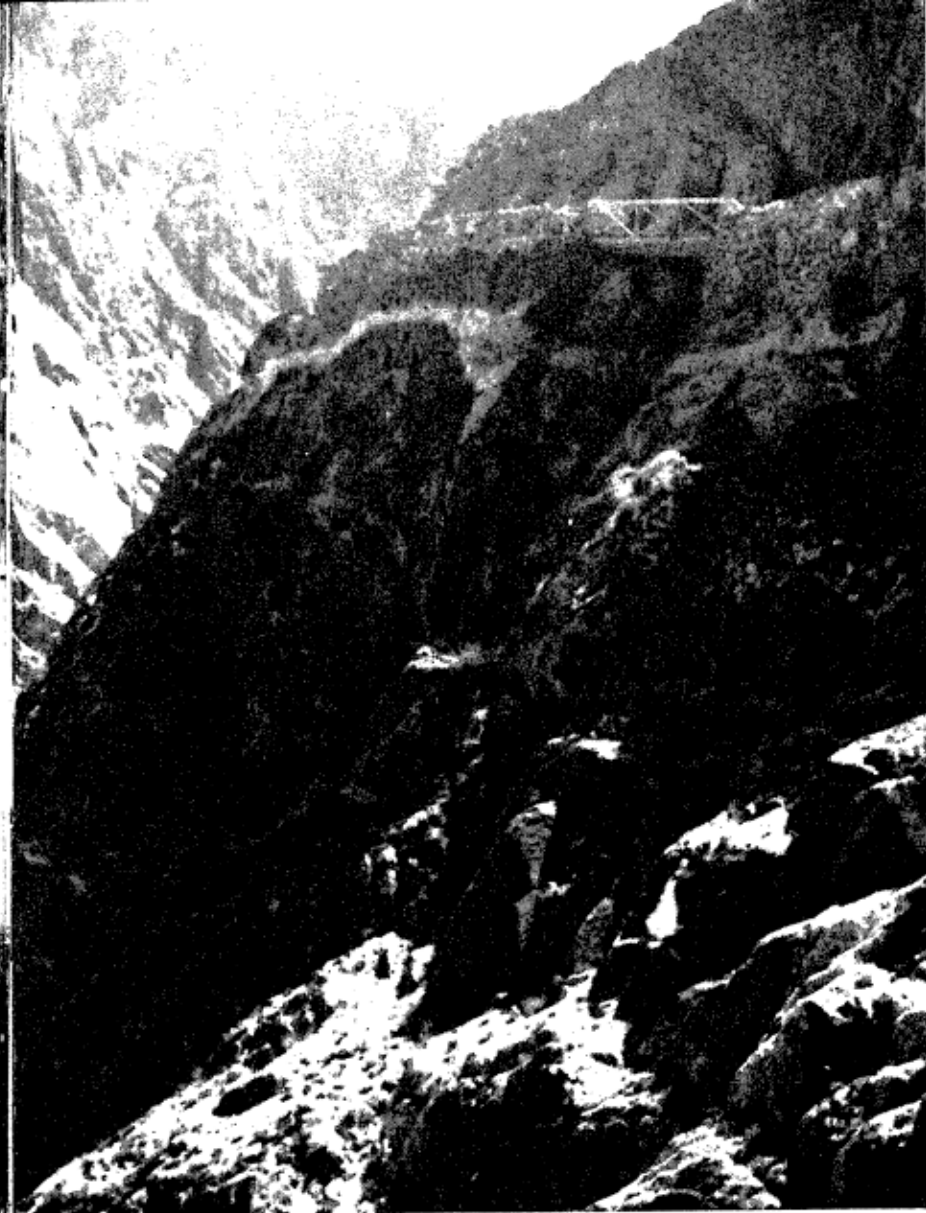


Water-hole in the Takla Makan



*(Above)* Camels awaiting their loads

*(Below)* Camel caravan at the end of a stage



Route between the High Pamirs and the Karakoram



Route along the Gilgit "road"

of the journey, to load up with supplies—and above all with water for the endless tea and *tsamba*.

It has had its ups and downs, like other communities, and there was a period when it seemed to be on the decline as a trading centre. Marco Polo passed that way, eastwards bound, and wrote of it (spelling the name, as some atlases do even today, "Char-chan"): *In former times Charchan was flourishing, but it has been laid waste by the Tartars. Through the province in which it stands run several large streams in which are found chalcedonies and jaspers, which are carried for sale to Cathay (the old name for China itself); and such is their abundance that they form a considerable article of commerce.*

*The whole extent of this countryside is an entire sand, in which the water is for the most part bitter and unpalatable. When an army of Tartars passes through, if they are enemies the inhabitants are plundered of their goods, and if friends their cattle are killed and devoured. For this reason when they are aware of the approach of any body of troops, they flee, with their families and cattle, into the sandy desert to the distance of two days' journey, towards some spot where they can find fresh water, and are by that means enabled to subsist.*

*From the same apprehension, when they collect their*

*harvest, they deposit the grain in caverns among the sands, taking monthly from their store so much as may be wanted for their consumption. Nor can any person besides themselves know the places to which they resort for this purpose, because the tracks of their feet are presently effaced by the wind. . .*



Approaching "a haven of refuge"

But Cherchen obviously picked up, after Marco Polo's day, seven hundred years ago. After all, the savage Tartars who had conquered China and terrorized the whole vast area between the Yellow Sea and the West, were eventually subdued. Kublai Khan had entertained Marco Polo, replacing the terrorism of

his grandfather, the great Genghiz Khan, by wise and moderate rule. But his grandson, Timurlane, or Tamerlane, in his turn, revived the rule of terror and so angered the Chinese that when eventually he died they rose against his lawless hordes and, by a supreme effort, drove them westwards, ever westwards, until they were forced into the wilderness of the notorious Altai Shan, where they were scattered into small, unco-ordinated communities and lost their power.

When Peter Fleming and his small caravan at last stumbled wearily into it, Cherchen was truly a haven of refuge. It offered everything a desert traveller could ask for. They had carpets to sit and lie on, instead of desert sand; they received gifts of chickens and—still more to their taste—a grand basketful of eggs. Only as they ate meals of chicken, eggs, newly-baked bread, sugar-lumps, fruit, did they begin to realize what privations they had endured for the past hundred and twenty days. After all those monotonous meals of *tsamba*, varied only occasionally by antelope-steak, this menu was a mixture of ambrosia and nectar!

It is small wonder that they lingered. For five blissful days they wallowed in comparative luxury. They had many hours of sleep to catch up on; when

they were not eating, they were sleeping, and when they were not sleeping—they were eating. After all, this has been the custom of camel men all down the centuries; there was no reason why they should not fall in with a custom so excellent!

## 7

*The Desert* Buran

FAR as the oasis of Cherchen seems from the eastern approach to the Tarim Basin, at Lop Nor, it is very much further from Kashgar, at the western end of the desert. Perhaps not more than a quarter of the way along; certainly not more than a third. Camel men working their way eastwards may be tempted to linger a day or two extra, knowing that the worst is behind them; those travelling westwards know that at Cherchen they have completed only a small portion of it.

Peter Fleming and Ella Maillart rearranged their transport, before leaving the oasis and plunging into the heart of the desert. They now had a couple of camels, one pony, and five asses. There were nine stages ahead of them—and hard stages at that—before they would reach the next true oasis. This new section of the Takla Makan was even more formidable than the section they had already seen. There were sand-dunes stretching interminably ahead of them, some with tamarisk, some with camel-scrub growing



scraggily on their slopes. There were stretches where rounded stones, great pebbles the size of human skulls and not unlike them even close to, were scattered thickly on the sand. Among these it was no uncommon thing to find the bleached skeleton of some pony, ass or camel lying just where it had collapsed days, weeks, months before: such skeletons always strike a chill into anyone encountering them, for they are a silent reminder of the fate that awaits every traveller who penetrates into the heart of the desert—if Fate has marked him down.

Among these sand-dunes every now and then a patch of darker sand can be descried. From a distance it looks like mud, and the traveller is pleased, for where there is mud there must be moisture. He spurs on his beasts, and licks his parched lips. But he is usually both right and wrong. It is evident that there has been water there, perhaps quite recently; but usually it has evaporated under the intense glare of the desert sun, leaving the sand baked hard as concrete—and just about as lacking in moisture. These are the small desert water-holes: no better, the majority of them, than the mirage that lures the traveller onwards, only to break his heart.

Sometimes, by scooping away the cakes of crusty brown sand from the surface, it is possible to dig

down to something which is just a little moist. The thirsty man scrapes and scrapes, exhausting himself in the process: and at best comes to a film of salt or brackish moisture collected in little hollows and alive with repulsive insects, infected with who knows what sort of poison.

It is in this stretch of the Takla Makan that the desert traveller is most likely to encounter what the Turkis—the nomadic inhabitants of the few habitable portions of the Tarim Basin—call the *buran*. The first sign of this horror is usually a darkening and yellowing of the daylight to the west—the direction in which the traveller is almost sure to be moving when he meets it. The colour is a sinister hue of dark yellow, dirty yellow, an evil yellow not to be found among an artist's paint tubes. It strengthens in intensity, assuming shape and substance, and appears soon like a great wall spread across the desert, above the level of the sand to begin with, hanging in the sky like a heavy, impenetrable curtain.

Suspended it may be. But it is much more substantial than a curtain; and alive: very much alive. For this is no less than a Takla Makan sandstorm, an inhabitant of the desert fiercer, more powerful, more ruthless, than any of the nomads on their wiry, tough little ponies; more cruel than the Tartars

under Timurlane. It moves far more swiftly than it appears to do. The veteran traveller prepares for it the instant he becomes aware of its existence. He counts himself fortunate that he has seen it far enough away to be able to make his preparations to meet it before it descends upon him.

For descend upon him it does. It races towards him: a moving wall of sand suspended on the wings of a racing wind. As it approaches it can be heard, and the sound it makes is one to frighten not only the traveller who hears it for the first time but the desert dweller who has heard it a hundred, a thousand times. It screams like a demon in agony. It races onward, dropping lower as it approaches, sucking up more and yet more of the sand from the surface of the desert, so that the whole curtain of sand is in constant, continuous, violent, terrifying motion.

If he is lucky enough to have time, the traveller erects his tent, weights the tent-flaps with anything he can lay his hands on that has weight, draws the door-flap tightly to, and grips its edges with all his strength. And then waits.

But however determinedly he has tried to make his small tent sand-proof, the sand of the *buran* penetrates, through invisible slits, through joints, through the stitching, through the closed ventilator,

underneath the lower edges, around the tabs to which the guy-ropes are attached. The floor-level rises almost perceptibly as the fine wind-borne sand piles on to it. Sleeping-bags, blankets, cooking utensils, stove, provision chests, tins, water containers: everything inside the tent is covered and coated



Sheltering from the *Buran*

thick with the inescapable sand. The temperature is such that the sand seems actually to be sticky instead of dry; it clings to any bare skin the traveller may have been unable to cover; it creeps in between his clenched lips and teeth, up his nostrils, underneath his closed eyelids, into his ears; it is relentless as a tide—and very much more frightening.

If he has been unlucky enough to be overtaken by

the *buran* before he has had a chance to pitch his tent, then he is unlucky indeed. There is only one thing he can do: make his mount lie down on the sand with its back to the direction of the oncoming *buran*, crawl between its folded legs, bury his head in the beast's belly, and hope that it will take the brunt of the wind and sand and so save him from the worst of its fury. Man and mount are covered thick with sand in a matter of seconds. If, as is often the case, the *buran* rages for a long time, successive waves of it advancing like shock troops and each loaded with desert sand, hot and sticky and clinging, then they are often completely buried in it and must fight their way out when at last it has gone by. Sometimes it is too late: the *buran* has been known to kill.

It is not surprising, therefore, that this fiend of the desert has been given many names. *Buran* is one; another is the *harmsil*. Sven Hedin encountered it repeatedly while he sought for vanished sections of the Silk Road. Another traveller in the desert described it as a "bright, yellowy-grey snow-fall", but that last word does not seem a very good choice, for there is nothing cool or clean about the *buran*! He went on to describe how it settled on the members of his party, covering them in thick layers, mixing with their sweat and clinging greasily to their skin beneath

their garments, no matter how carefully they had wrapped themselves up for protection from it.

The further west the traveller in the Takla Makan goes, the emptier it seems to become. So strong, so incessant, is the desert wind that even though there may be quite a number of camel caravans, there is always the risk that their trails will be obliterated by the wind-blown sand immediately they have passed by. Since, if a caravan is to survive at all, it must reach water within a given time, it must not wander too far from the recognized trails. So, in some of the worst sections, the traveller finds that tall baskets, packed full of stones and daubed with red paint or dye, have been set down at intervals as a sort of primitive milestone. When a man has been travelling for days on end with hardly a landmark to help him estimate his position, such small landmarks are a blessing indeed. They must seem to him like lighthouses sending their giant rays across the empty waste of waters traversed by overdue vessels.

In all these long, barren, hazardous stages the west-bound traveller is heartened by the knowledge that when he arrives at the desert "city" of Khotan he will find abundance. Khotan stands on one of the very few rivers that have not been swallowed up by the voracious sands of the Tarim Basin. It has always

been a halting-place for those taking the southern route of the Silk Road; it is larger, and less isolated, than Cherchen: a twin city made up of the "New City" enclosed by a great crenellated wall, and the "Old City", which lies outside the wall and is looked upon by the merchants and traders within the wall as "the native quarter". When the traveller has reached Khotan he is as near the western end of the Takla Makan as he was to the eastern end at Cherchen. Beyond is the fine oasis of Karghalik; then Yarkand, a bigger halting-place altogether; then, best of all, Kashgar itself, where the northern and southern routes finally meet and blend into one.

There is a custom in that part of the Tarim Basin that, except for officially authorized and large-scale camel caravans, all desert travellers passing through must change their animals at the end of each stage. For the nomads, who are old acquaintances, this presents no great difficulty; but for unofficial and "foreign" caravans like that of Peter Fleming the amount of time that can be wasted, the fraying of tempers, the sense of frustration, the haggling over costs in tea bricks or local coin: all these add up to real trouble.

The Oriental does not look on time as the Westerner does; to him bargaining is an end in itself, a pleasure

he would not like to miss, and it matters little to him whether he sets out again the next day, or the next week. He knows there will always be the *buran*; there will always be the dried-up water-holes, the bleached skeletons and grinning skulls beside the half-obliterated trail. In other words, the conditions of his life are unchanging from month to month, year in and year out. There is as much time as there is desert sand.

With new mounts, new pack-animals, Peter Fleming and his small party left Khotan after spending four or five days there, and travelled on by forced-marches to the next oasis; and to the next after that; always with the vast Kunlun Shan towering above them on their left. And as they came nearer and nearer to the westward limit of the Tarim Basin, the Tien Shan, the Celestial Mountains, were closing in on them on their right-hand side. They were still perhaps a hundred miles distant, but it is difficult to estimate great distances over a barren waste of oven-like, shimmering, featureless sand.

They came to Guma, to Karghalik, the last big oasis belonging to the nomads of the Tarim Basin who call themselves Tungans. Once again their animals had to be changed. There were the usual delays, to which no Westerner ever takes kindly;



the usual promises, and broken promises, of the Oriental who cannot—or will not—appreciate the Westerner's needs. There was the usual haggling in the bazaars, the usual difficulty, impossibility, of buying pack-animals at a fair price. They made the usual threats to continue across the remaining stages of the desert, from oasis to oasis, on foot, rather than be mercilessly cheated by the dealers; and they received the usual scornful glances and veiled comments as a result, for it is considered that any man of substance, whether European or Chinese, who walks when he might sit in a saddle, is "losing face". Besides—to walk in the desert, unaccompanied by pack-animals, is to invite certain death. They had to give in, accept second-rate animals at prices higher than they should have been, if they were to continue on their way.

They came to Yarkand where, for the first time for many, many months, there was the prospect of meeting other Westerners: for the Swedes had a Mission there. It was an exciting prospect, for they had been twenty-eight days on this stretch of the Silk Road since leaving the oasis of Cherchen. But after the briefest halt in Yarkand, they moved on, ever westwards, with Kashgar now as their goal: the desert they felt, must begin to shrink, henceforward.

One of the unexpected things about this last stage of their desert journey is that the *buran* seems to have died away. Perhaps it was due to some trick of the mountain peaks in checking the straight course of the east-bound wind, allowing it insufficient momentum to pick up sand on its way to blister the unhappy desert traveller. The air, in those last miles of the Tarim Basin, proved to be clearer, and the travellers were at last able to see the great mountains that had towered above them for the past hundreds of miles—mountains rising to 20,000 feet and more which, because of the sand-filled air, they had only been vaguely aware of since they descended from them on to the desert.

Here once again were the giant Kunlun Shan crests soaring into the clear air, remote, forbidding, eternally snow-clad, inaccessible save to the few great mountaineers of any age. For the past five weeks they had been invisible to these travellers on the Silk Road, though their grim presence could constantly be felt; now they were making themselves known once more. Not for long, though. For as the Takla Makan narrows, as the enormous range of mountains barring its western end loom up and shut off the west with a massive rampart of stone, so haze, and then darkness, comes to fill the emptiness, and

the Kunlun Shan and the Tien Shan are shrouded once again in mystery.

But the trail is good, now, for these big oases are not so far from one another as they are further to the east. There are even milestones in this section of the Tarim Basin, though they are strange ones. You can call them "milestones", but in fact each is separated from the next by a distance of two-and-a-half miles—the Chinese *potai*. So, each "mile" is two-and-a-half times its true length; a desert camel takes just one hour to cover the distance between each one and the next. They are small turrets of stone built along the Silk Road in its last stages before Kashgar is reached. Long as the "miles" are, such landmarks help the traveller to feel he is making real progress.

Stranger even than those odd milestones, to the desert traveller who for a thousand miles has known no alternative to a sand trail except a hazardous mountain trail, are the last few miles into Kashgar. Here is a broad, dusty-sandy road, bordered by trees and—wonder of wonders—telegraph-poles. It is true that those poles carry only a single wire; and as you stare up at it you may wonder what messages pass along it, from whom they go and who is to be found at the receiving-end. For though one end of the wire goes into Kashgar, the other vanishes

like a spider's thread into the wilderness of sand that is the Tarim Basin. It is real, though; not, as the weary traveller may at first be inclined to think, a mirage in a new and puzzling form. Peter Fleming and Ella Maillart and their small train of hard-won animals followed it with quickening steps into Kashgar: the desert lay behind them at last.

## 8

Araba, Yurt *and* Joh

MARCO POLO entered Kashgar (which he called Kashcar) from the south-west, soon after emerging from the great mountains marking the frontier between Tartary and Afghanistan. He was impressed favourably by its appearance; less favourably by the men he encountered there. *At length, he wrote, you reach a place called Kashcar. There are handsome gardens, orchards and vineyards. Abundance of cotton is produced there, as well as flax and hemp. Merchants from here travel to all parts of the world; but in truth they are a covetous, sordid race eating badly and drinking worse.* But it must be remembered that Marco Polo came from a distinguished Venetian family, with high standards of morality; he was civilized, and art-loving; also, he was no more than a boy, though a highly-intelligent boy, when he did the journey, so perhaps he exaggerated a little.

Other travellers have been impressed by the size and vigorous life of Kashgar, which they have found to be a town, rather than just another desert oasis. It has perhaps 80,000 inhabitants, and of course these numbers swell as the big caravans pour into it from east and west. It is a trading centre for wool and sheepskins, which are exported westwards and northwards into Russia in exchange for iron, oil, and manufactured goods of many kinds: goods which the people of Sinkiang have come to recognize as not only desirable but necessary. The influence of the West is penetrating more and more deeply into the hinterland and the barren places.

Around Kashgar the desert is less hostile, less terrible, than it is further to the east. It has been to some extent tamed by the effect of enormous numbers of travellers converging upon it. Traffic passing through Kashgaria, as the region is called, must be at least double what it is at any one of the other oases, large or small, on the two branches of the Silk Road. Smaller trails, too, lead in from the Tien Shan passes, and from Andizhan, in Russian Turkistan, and from other trading centres to the north and west.

Because the terrain is flatter, the going firmer, the conditions less arduous here, many travellers actually

use wheeled vehicles—unseen further to the east. They are crude and cumbersome affairs unlikely to look anything more than a queer joke to Westerners accustomed to the refinements of the mid-twentieth century. But compared with riding astride a camel, a mule, or ass, or Tibetan pony, the wheeled vehicle offers a number of advantages.



*Araba and Mapa*

The heaviest vehicle in use is the *araba*. This is a massively constructed wooden cart, with one axle and a pair of six-foot wheels set eight feet apart—which is a considerable advantage when the trail is rough and uneven; wheels set any closer together than that might have a tendency to overthrow the

vehicle they supported. The wheels have studs projecting outwards from their rims. These give "bite" on loose surfaces. The shafts are heavy, and there may be as many as five horses harnessed to it: one between the shafts and the other four arranged in two pairs, one on each side of the shaft-horse and just a little ahead of him. To drive such a team calls for skill and "know-how".

The load that an *araba* can carry is astonishing. Though the Mongol, Turki, Tungan, Kirghiz or other nomad of the Tarim Basin is generally so careless, even callous, in his treatment of pack-animals that Westerners consider him needlessly cruel, he does pay much attention to the loading of his *araba*, being careful to balance the load on each side of the axle, fore and aft, so that the bulk of the weight is taken by the wheels and the shaft-horse does not have to support overmuch of it in addition to the weight of the shafts.

Over the top of the load, the *araba* has a number of big, curved half-hoops, their ends braced in the sides of the vehicle and their upper curves carrying a heavy top, or "tilt", made of felt or some other heavy material. The front of this is stiffened so that it projects forwards, the whole superstructure giving the impression of a G.I.'s peaked forage-cap. What



cannot be crammed inside the *araba* is attached to its sides or slung beneath its undercarriage.

There is another Kashgarian vehicle known as the *mapa*. This is much less massively constructed, though it follows the same lines. In fact, it is really a light-weight *araba*, designed to be hauled by a shaft-horse and only two trace-horses, one on each side and slightly ahead. The notion of having the horses in tandem does not seem to have occurred to the owners; which is odd, since tandem-harnessed horses should be able to follow a trail more easily than horses going three, or five, abreast.

Neither the *araba* nor the *mapa* is fitted with springs. The heavy axle is set solid beneath the undercarriage. To travel any distance in such a vehicle, for anyone unaccustomed to that form of locomotion, must be agony. The experienced traveller by *mapa* or *araba* piles beneath him the largest bale of wool or sheepskins he can lay his hands on, and in that way manages to insulate himself to some slight extent against the shocks of desert trails.

Whether he is travelling by camel caravan, on pony-back, by *araba* or by *mapa* in this part of the Tarim Basin, he does so if possible by night. For this is relatively low-lying territory, sandy of course, more

sheltered from the westerly winds than the more open stretches of the eastern desert, and so not only blazingly hot but beset by the most voracious and insatiable desert flies, and worse still, mosquitoes. Travellers here continually find that where a saddle, or a badly attached load, has worn a sore patch in a camel's shaggy hide, a donkey or pony's back, flies have congregated in myriads and are feasting on the raw flesh. If attention is not promptly paid to these raw patches, grubs are born in the flesh and poison soon sets in. The nomad does not seem to worry much about this—unless it is a beast of his own that is affected, when he may perhaps rouse himself to do something about it.

On all the trails leading into and out of Kashgar there is a continuous flow of caravans large and small. Camels with their 350-lb. loads; donkeys and mules and ponies; *arabas* and *mapas*; and also, sometimes, an odd-looking contrivance much favoured by merchants and men of substance making journeys that are not too long or too strenuous. This is the *joh*.

The *joh* consists of little more than a wooden framework slung on a camel's sides. Each framework is well lined with felt, and felt hangs over it as protection from sandstorms and cold by day and by

night. Inside the *joh* the traveller can curl up in his voluminous robes, wrap himself about with sheepskins and blankets, and actually manage to sleep. But he must be, like most Chinese, smaller than average height, or he will be impossibly cramped. Whole caravans of these *johs* are to be seen travelling into and out of Kashgar, and the chances are that each is carrying some Chinese official—an inspector or tax-collector, maybe—on his way to deal with some point of administration.

Entry into Kashgar, like entry into any of these desert townships, is not possible all round the clock. A great wall surrounds it, and in this are set gates, some of them double, some of them treble ones. At night time these are usually closed, and barred. The outer gate simply gives access to an outer courtyard, and this area is "covered" by an elaborate system of spy-holes and loopholes through which, if necessary, shots can be fired. The garrison will be on duty, alert to deal with any trouble-makers: a force of invaders would find itself in a very unpleasant predicament if the outer gate was barred behind it, the inner gate barred also, and muskets levelled from every loophole, firing in all directions. They would be caught like rats in a multiple trap and not one of them would escape with his life.

The inner gateway is usually set at an angle to the outer one, so that to pass from one to the other involves slowing down and manœuvring, which of course is all to the advantage of the defenders. But once inside, past the outer and inner courtyards, the incoming party has been accepted as genuine caravan men, traders, merchants, *bona fide* travellers.

Now there is the bazaar, where almost all the general trading is done. Here are the booths where native saddles are on sale, beautifully fashioned and embroidered by experts carrying on the age-old tradition of saddle-making. Here are the fur-trimmed hats which protect the desert travellers from driving sand, icy wind, snow, and the stark cold of night travel. Here are the long-stemmed, metal-bowled pipes which the nomads favour; the snuff-boxes, daggers, jugs and kettles and platters. Here are the ears of corn, the slabs of unleavened bread, the chunks of roasted mutton impaled on skewers and all ready to be eaten. Into the bazaars come the nomads from the distant parts of Kashgaria, to sell their produce and buy what they need. And the traders, you may be sure, are careful to see that they buy and sell always at a profit, at the expense of the simple desert people!

When Peter Fleming and Ella Maillart were in

Kashgar they felt—by contrast with the desert through which their small caravan had been traveling so long and so arduously—that they had “reached civilization”. Yet the map showed that even if they continued to travel by forced-marches, at the maximum speed of which their beasts were capable, they would still have five, six or even more weeks on the trail before coming to the first railhead in India, which was their objective. And the trail would take them over a succession of giant mountains, over passes 15,000 feet and more above sea-level, through country as wild and dangerous and forbidding as any they had met with hitherto in their long westwards-bound trek.

They lingered “in civilization” for a fortnight; perhaps with the half-recognized desire to stave-off for yet a little longer the moment when they would have to launch out on the last stage of their great overland journey. There was comparative comfort in Kashgar: a variety of food such as they had almost forgotten, as much good, clear water as they could wish for, and the company of people who were not quite as uncouth as the nomads of the desert.

But the time came when they had to say their good-byes, to leave the friends they had made there, to make their final purchases in the bazaar; it was

time for them to be on their way again, heading west-by-south over the last long leagues of the Tarim Basin and then up into the giant mountains that silently awaited them.

They had left Lanchow, the real start of their journey, in the first week of March; it was on August 8th, five months almost to the day, that they turned their faces south-westwards and lifted them to the distant mountains. They had with them four ponies, loaned to them by someone in Kashgar, to carry their baggage, which now included two carpets presented to them by the mayor! They had an escort of two Chinese soldiers. There were also three Turkis, deputed to look after the pack-animals and generally make themselves useful on the way. They themselves rode on ponies. It was a small caravan, by desert standards; but they felt they had got off to a good start, were well equipped, and ought with luck and good management to be free of the Tarim Basin and at the beginning of the long trail to the first of the mountain passes fairly soon. Beyond those passes lay their ultimate goal, India.

The heat in this far corner of the desert is tremendous. Sheltered by high mountains, the sand shimmers oven-hot; if there is any wind that is cooled by its passage over the snowy crests of the Karakorams,

Kunlun Shan or Tien Shan, it passes too high overhead to bring any relief to travellers still on the sand-dunes far below. Men and animals alike wilt in this fierce heat; the sheer effort to keep moving at all is almost more than they can achieve. The stages have to be shorter than the usual ones, and fortunately the oases are a little closer together than they are further to the east.

The small caravan halted at Yapchan, halted again at Yangi Hissar, through which they had passed on their way to Kashgar a fortnight or so before; and came at length to a small oasis on the very edge of the Tarim Basin called Igiz Yar. It was little more than a water-hole, it is true, but it offered refreshment; and, what is more, it offered for the first time a view of the mountains ahead. For now the heat-haze and dust-haze had abated a little and the air was clear enough to see through for some way ahead.

And there the desert trail came to an end. Immediately ahead was the entrance to a mountain ravine, with a deserted Chinese fort right at its mouth. This was the threshold to the mountains. They approached it with gladness, in spite of the hardships and dangers which they knew would be awaiting them. When the old psalmist wrote the words, "I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes to the Hills", he was

expressing an emotion which countless thousands of travellers since his day have experienced.

As the trail begins to climb, there at the far end of the dreaded Takla Makan, the traveller is penetrating into the country of the Kirghiz, a wild, tough, nomadic people who are acclimatized to living at great altitudes and who seem impervious to any sort of weather, however extreme. Mountain cold and the furnace-like heat of the desert seem alike to be acceptable to them. They are a proud, even arrogant, people, quick to attack an enemy, tending to shoot first and ask questions—if any—afterwards.

The country has made the Kirghiz what they are. Here, among the foothills of the great mountains, only just clear of the desert itself, there are ravines alternating with plateaux, each one higher than the last. Where the trails are steep and narrow, among the ravines, the skeletons of pack-animals that have fallen, or been knocked over by tumbling boulders, are a constant reminder of the grim experiences that await all who travel that way, and especially anyone who fails even once to mind his step, or who drives his beasts too hard and without sufficient precaution.

The trail mounts a succession of steeply tilted shelves of rock. Sometimes torrents of water pour



over them—melted glacier water from the snowy wastes many thousands of feet overhead; sometimes they are bone dry, slippery from the abrading action of wind-borne sand lifted from the desert below, whirled against them with tremendous power and revolving like a gigantic sanding-machine for hours and days on end. Vultures wheeling silently, menacingly above the trail remind the traveller that death is always just around the next corner; and that for them death is a means to live.

Like some of the other nomadic tribes inhabiting the few habitable parts of the Tarim Basin, the Kirghiz put up a cluster of what are known as *yurts* when they halt for the night. Marco Polo was much impressed by these, and as usual gave an accurate description of them: *Their huts, or tents, are formed of rods covered with felt, and being exactly round, and nicely put together, they can gather them into one bundle and make them up as packages, which they carry along with them on their migrations.* . . . He was writing many centuries ago, but travellers in the Kirghiz country today find that the principle of the *yurt* has remained unchanged ever since. And why not? After all, if the desert itself remains unchanged, the conditions in which the desert nomads must exist remain unchanged, and the means of supporting life

in those conditions naturally remain unchanged too. The *yurt* is—as many Westerners have found when they have been overtaken by the *buran* or dreaded *harmsil*—an excellent refuge from wind and dust storms.

It is usually about twenty feet in diameter, and exactly circular. For the first four feet or so, a criss-crossing willow framework rises from the ground. Above this, arched poles are criss-crossed upwards and over to form a flattened-dome shaped roof. Over these poles great sheets of shaped felt are laid, and lashed down over the whole of the framework with ropes. The door is always on the leeward side, and consists usually of reeds hung over with a light-weight felt that can be secured to prevent the worst of the sand from blowing in when the *buran* rages.

There is a vent in the middle of the roof for the smoke to escape. The smoke, of course, comes from the fire, which is normally built inside the *yurt* so that the occupants can sit around it and stave off the cold of the desert night while they eat and chat and smoke their long-stemmed pipes. The fire will usually be of dried yak dung—almost the only fuel to be found in quantity in this part of Chinese Turkestan. The dung is arranged in a hollow circle; the circle is filled in

with kindling such as twigs of stunted sage or camel-scrub, well dried in advance; this, when ignited, kindles the yak dung, which burns with a curious, blueish flame.

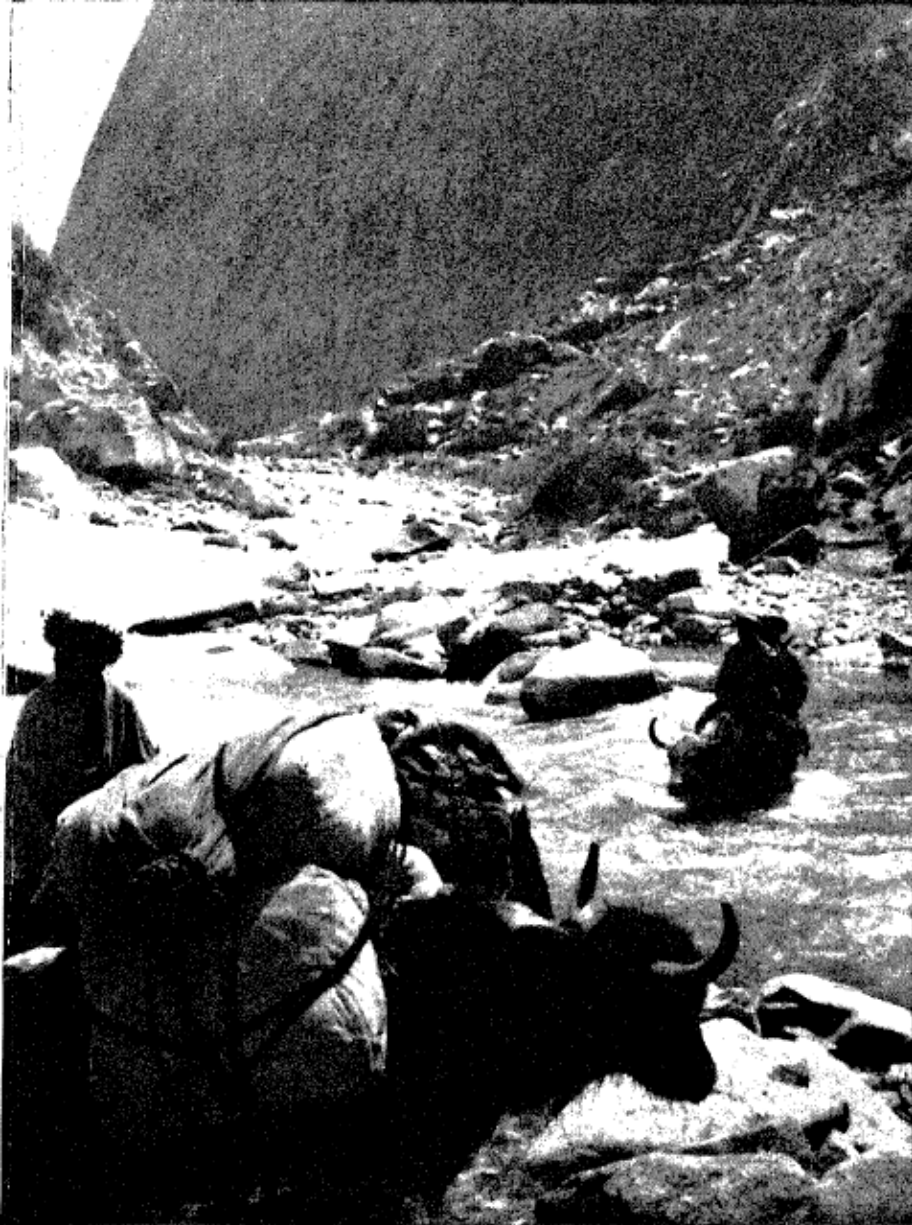
Marco Polo noted, as other Westerners have noted since, that it is the women of these nomad communities who seem to do all the work. *They attend to the*



Framework of a Kirghiz Yurt

*trading, he wrote, buy and sell, and provide everything necessary for their husbands and their families, the time of the men being entirely devoted to hunting and matters that relate to the military life.*

More recent travellers have noted that it is the women who assemble and dismantle the *yurts*. A full-sized *yurt* can be dismantled and loaded on to the pack-animals well inside an hour. This may seem a long time compared with the time taken to strike a



Yaks near the 15,000-foot Chichiklik Pass



*(Left)* A Turki in Yangi Hissar market



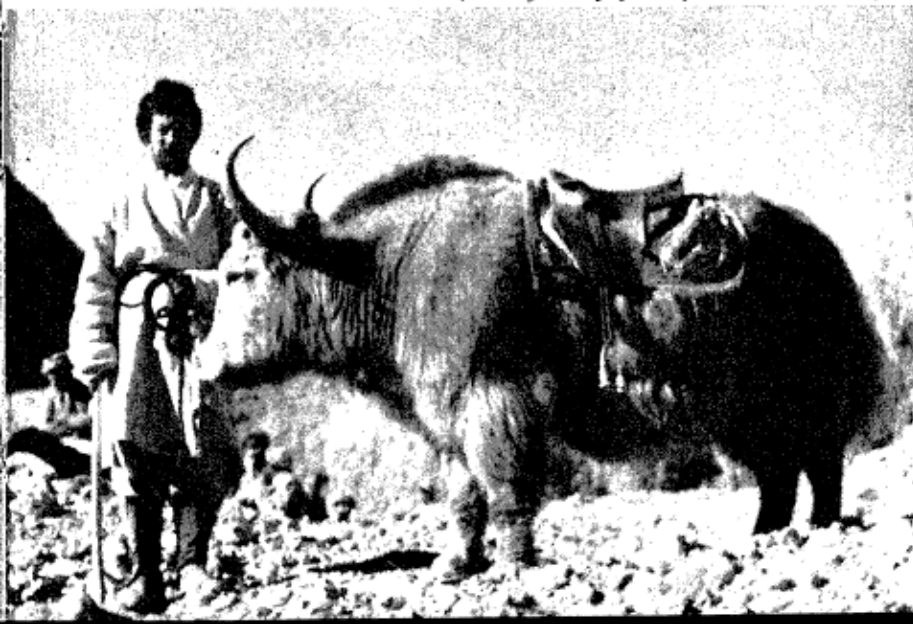
*(Right)* A camel driver at Sining



(Above) A family of nomadic Kirghiz in front of their yurt

(Below) Karakoram herdsman with his yak

*(Photos by courtesy of the Royal Central Asian Society)*





*(Above)* Inn courtyard on the Old Silk Road

*(Below)* Herdsmen eating at 14,000 feet on the Sinkiang-Tibet border



modern camping tent; but after all, the *yurt* is much more than a tent: it is a habitation, commodious, substantial, snug, and composed of heavy material. It is large enough to house two families of Kirghiz at a time—consisting perhaps of a dozen or a score of men, women and children, plus a stranger or two who may have asked for hospitality. The material of which it is made is so heavy that it insulates the occupants of the *yurt* from the cold of winter and night and also from the heat of summer and day.

The meals of the Kirghiz are ample, and more varied than those of many other nomadic peoples. Marco Polo noted that they *subsist upon flesh and milk, eating the produce of their sport*—by which of course he means eating what the menfolk have killed when out hunting; *they eat also*, he adds, *a small animal not unlike a rabbit, called by our people Pharaoh's Mice, which during the summer season are found in great abundance. They eat flesh of every description: horses, camels, and even dogs, provided they are fat. They drink mares' milk, which they prepare in such a manner that it has the qualities and flavour of white wine. They term it in their language, kemurs. . . .*

The "kemurs" of Marco Polo was of course the famous *kumiss* of today. It is, as he said, mares' milk,



and it has been a favourite drink, and a very refreshing one, too, when you have learned to appreciate its unusual taste, in many desert regions where mares and stallions are to be found. It is a sour drink, made from thin milk lightly fermented.

The true nomad prepares his *kumiss* by pouring the mares' milk into a whole coltskin that has been sewn up to make a watertight container in the shape of a bag, the neck of the skin being the mouth. In this is placed a wooden "dasher", and the contents are rapidly churned for a long time by the women *kumiss*-makers. The longer the coltskin has been in use the faster the contents begin to ferment and the more pungent they become; for the skins are never cleaned out between one brewing and the next, and they therefore get more and more sour with each successive brewing!

An alternative Kirghiz drink, certainly one that is more widespread, is the concoction of tea, butter made from yak milk, and yak milk itself, the whole flavoured with plenty of salt and sometimes other ingredients calculated to add to the delectable taste. Such a drink as this will be found when the Kirghiz are feasting on a newly killed sheep.

Feasts such as these, which belong rather to ceremonial occasions than to everyday life, are held out-

side, not inside, the *yurt*, for too many people must be gathered together on such special occasions. The sheep is brought to the site and its throat expertly slit with a long, gleaming dagger. The blood, while it is still warm, is immediately fed to the crowd of



Vultures, silent and watchful

snarling dogs that belong to the community. The skin is dexterously removed, in one piece, and laid on one side for cleaning and making into a sheepskin coat for the owner or someone else. The sheep's liver and kidneys are skewered, grilled over the yak-dung fire,

and passed round among selected members of the company, still on the skewers and hot from the fire, to be snapped up and swallowed with relish.

The main carcass of the sheep is thoroughly roasted and then laid on the ground, or on a plank if the Kirghiz community possesses such a rare luxury. Then each member of the company draws his razor-sharp dagger and hacks at the portion of the carcass he particularly favours. You can imagine the firelight glinting murkily on the shining blades, the sound of sharp steel scraping on bones beneath the flesh, the belching of those who have got at the carcass first and already begun to eat—for to belch loudly is looked upon as an expression of gratitude to the donor of the feast. Soon the carcass is reduced to a skeleton; the skeleton itself is torn apart and bones broken out from it and gnawed in the fingers. Overhead, silent and watchful, the vultures wheel, in the hope that something at any rate will be left for their picking when camp is broken and men and pack-animals and dogs move on.

At such a feast there may be a delicacy to follow: yoghurt, heavy clotted cream made from yak milk, cheese made from the cream, soft, spongy, odd-tasting, looking like wet cement. The Kirghiz love it. And always, lashings and lashings of the traditional

butter-tea, or fermented *kumiss*, to wash down the food and slake the thirst of men who must breathe in desert sand with every breath they draw. And, finally, sleep in the warm, dark, smoky interior of the *yurt*: desert life as it has always been, is still, and is likely to remain.

## 9

### *The Yak*

IT was into the territory of these people that Peter Fleming's small caravan now penetrated: the territory of a nomadic tribe who spend their lives following their herds and flocks in search of pasture. Marco Polo noted that they organized their lives in such a way that they progress higher and higher up from the valleys, seeking the grass and herbage released from the winter snows on the mountain slopes. *They never remain fixed, he wrote, but as the winter approaches remove to the plains in order to find pasture for their cattle; and in summer they frequent cold situations in the mountains, where there is water and verdure and their cattle are free from annoyance of horse-flies and other biting insects. They must always be seeking fresh pasture to feed the multitude of which their flocks and herds consist. . .*

As the mountain passes grow steeper, ponies are unable to make further progress, and the camels have long been left behind. For these mountain trails are steeper by far than those on which these

travellers made their way across the Nan Shan and the eastern end of the Kunlun Shan. In fact, the only animal capable of negotiating the worst of these trails is the yak—in many ways one of the most remarkable animals in the world. At this point Peter Fleming off-loaded his ponies and loaded up some commandeered yaks for the next stage of the climb towards the first of the great passes.

Marco Polo's comment on the yak is a curious one: *They are wild cattle that in point of size may be compared to elephants. Their colour is a mixture of white and black, and they are very beautiful to the sight. The hair upon every part of their bodies lies down smooth, excepting upon the shoulder, where it stands up to the height of about three palms. This hair, or rather wool, is white, and more soft and delicate than silk. Many of these cattle, taken wild, have become domesticated, and the breed produced between them and the common cow are noble animals, and better qualified to undergo fatigue than any other kind. They are accustomed to carry heavier burthens and to perform twice the labour that could be derived from the ordinary sort, being both active and powerful. . .*

He was right, of course, about the efficiency of the yak as a pack-carrying, or even riding, animal; but wrong about its size. Perhaps because he was

young and impressionable, he remembered inaccurately when, later on, he came to write down his impressions. For as a matter of fact the yak is neither so large nor so heavy as an elephant, by a very long way indeed.



Kirghiz Yak

It is, however, extremely powerful and active. Generally speaking it is about as big as a well-grown horse, but much more solid. It has something of the solidity of a bullock. Its shaggy hide ranges from black to grey and brindle. The hair is so long

that it trails on the ground on each side; the feet are cloven-hoofed; like the dog, it possesses no sweat-glands, so that when working at high altitudes, or labouring heavily, it pants loudly in just the same way as a dog does—though very much more loudly.

For many hundreds of years the yak has been the constant associate of the nomadic tribes in this part of Chinese Turkestan. It has been referred to as "a one-animal, social-security programme"; and though this may just seem a joke, there is in fact a good deal of truth in it. For the yak is useful to its owner in such an extraordinary number and variety of ways that it is almost a guarantee of livelihood and security.

The yak is an extremely powerful pack-animal. It can be loaded heavily, and will carry its load where no other pack-animal could possibly go. In spite of its size and weight, and its shaggy, trailing coat, it is astonishingly nimble. If it spies grass or something else on which it wishes to feed, it will climb almost vertically, load and all, and eat where no other creature save perhaps a mountain goat or ibex could find a footing.

It is often used as a riding animal, though this takes a good deal of getting used to, for its back is broad, and to straddle a yak is, as one sorely



disillusioned traveller once remarked, "like straddling a dining-table". On the whole, though, to use a yak as a riding animal is to invite disaster. A yak will travel all day, for long stages and over rough country, with a heavy, unwieldy load roped to it; and it will make very little protest. But if it is being ridden, it has a curious faculty of becoming suddenly tired. And a tired yak—or rather, a yak pretending to be tired in order to rid itself of an unwanted rider—is one of the most unmanageable beasts known to man. The bucking bronco is a placid creature by contrast!

The yak evinces striking originality in disposing of its rider. It will make a path for itself very close to overhanging rock, so that the man on its back must duck low to avoid being swept off. Even then he may be unlucky. Or the yak, with diabolical intelligence, will make its way into a clump of thorn bushes, lingering as it passes through them so that its rider's legs are pierced by the long, needle-sharp spines and he is forced to dismount by sheer agony. Or it will notice an almost perpendicular bit of the trail, either upwards or downwards, and decide without warning to go that way. Its rider, unless he is both alert and extraordinarily tenacious, will promptly slide over the yak's head, or over its rump, and tumble

heavily to the ground. The yak, it appears, "knows all the answers"!

In spite of its unpleasant habit of showing its owner what it thinks of him, however, the yak remains a very valuable property indeed. In addition to being a useful pack-animal and occasional mount, it has many other attributes. Its coarser hair can be woven into stout cloth suitable for garments or even tent coverings; its hide makes durable boots, tough enough to withstand the roughest going on desert or mountain trail; the thinner parts of its hide make excellent leather thonging for tent-fastening and a hundred other purposes.

Oddly, too, its tail is one of its most valuable smaller assets. Yak tails furnish the Kirghiz owner with the only commodity which he can export to the outside world. Sold to merchants for distribution in India, they are turned into fly-whisks such as those used by officials and members of the wealthy classes; sold to merchants for export to America, they are transformed into "whiskers" for the innumerable Santa Clauses to be found at Christmas time in all the stores of a great industrial continent!

The yak is a ready and reliable source of supply of various desirable commodities for the larder. Yak milk, yak butter (sometimes called *ghee*) and the

cheese made from these, is part of the staple Kirghiz diet. The milk, though not large in quantity, is so rich in fat that it takes little to turn it into butter. In territory where trees are hardly known and small, stunted bushes and scrub is the best that can be found, Kirghiz fuel consists almost entirely—of yak dung. Every dropping is carefully collected and stored, dried as quickly as possible, carried in bulk from halting-place to halting-place, and used for the fires on which the tea is boiled, the sheep or other flesh roasted, and from which the warmth comes to protect the nomads from the bitter cold that descends on them at sundown. It is easy, then, to see just why the yak is such an invaluable property: to own one is to be fortunate; to own a herd is to be a millionaire.

Immensely strong, with stamina that enables it to keep going in conditions that would mean the death of any other animal, able to swim unharmed through icy water, resistant to extremes of heat and cold alike, as nimble, almost, as a monkey and patient as an ox, the yak is the nomad's great stand-by: his friend as well as his loyal servant throughout its life. And when it dies, its flesh is good to eat, its hide becomes useful garments, its horns may be carved into handles for knives and other utensils: so the

nomad has a permanent and tangible souvenir of the animal that has served him so faithfully for so long.

Not the least of the yak's assets is the fact that it lives and thrives at great altitudes—well above 10,000 feet. Here the air is extremely rarefied and the sheer effort to move, let alone carry a load, may well prove beyond the strength and resources of anyone unaccustomed to such altitudes. Peter Fleming, knowing how high the trail they were about to follow would climb to the Indian frontier and beyond, was wise to enlist the services of the animal so well adapted to working in such conditions. For he was now entering on the initial stages of the notorious "Gilgit Road"—one of the most terrible trails in all Asia.

It was the middle of August. At first the ravine they were climbing did not seem too formidable, and they made fair progress. Here and there, in places where the ground had levelled out a little, to make a miniature plateau, there would be a small cluster of *yurts*, whose Kirghiz occupants in spite of their reputation, seemed friendly enough. They nodded their approval at seeing the familiar yak engaged on the task of humping the Westerners' baggage and equipment up the trail. They showed them where the marmots—the "Pharaoh's Mice"

that Marco Polo had observed—were to be found. Two of the Kirghiz had just returned from a point further up the trail where a donkey belonging to an earlier caravan had fallen and died of a broken back on the boulders far below. Proudly, they held up a set of four small iron shoes which they had laboriously removed, while fighting off the enormous vultures, known in those regions as *lammergeyers* and notorious for their ferocity and fearlessness as they swoop down to snatch at any carcass they can descry as they wheel overhead.

The trail steepened as they penetrated deeper and deeper, higher and higher, into the mountain masses of the Karakorams, on their left, and the Pamirs on their right. The highest of the Pamirs is Muztagh Ata, well over 24,000 feet high, an outsize giant among giants; but the peaks of the Karakorams out-topped these by thousands of feet. It was forbidding country to penetrate, indeed.

Their immediate objective was the Chichiklik Pass, at 15,000 feet. It rose far, far above the snow line, and the steep mountainsides across which it cut were as barren, hard and unyielding as cast iron. Not a tree, not a scrub, grew on them: it was a mountainscape that might have been carved off some dead planet and dropped on the India-Chinese Turkestan frontier by

some evil-minded giant determined to do his uttermost to choke-off travellers and bring about their death by exhaustion and exposure.

On each side of the trail lie skeletons of animals that have died in the attempt to scale the pass. Some of them, even, are the skeletons of yaks, tried beyond even their tremendous strength and endurance. Some of them are of men; but where men have died on the Gilgit Road their companions have usually lingered long enough to collect a few stones and raise a cairn over their bodies. Over the cairns they sometimes place a horsetail decoration, as a sign of their grief at the passing of a former comrade.

At great heights the Kirghiz yak drivers have the habit—one which at first strikes Westerners as cruel in the extreme—of prodding their beasts in the nose with a sharp-pointed steel spike or the tip of a dagger. The blood gushes out from the wound and slops to the rock below. When taxed with being cruel the Kirghiz explain that they are "blood-letting". An animal, they say, can work at these high altitudes much better if it is relieved of a little of its blood. Since it is a tradition handed down from their ancestors who used these mountain trails for generations, for centuries, there is probably truth in what they say, namely that blood-letting eases their breathing.

It was then mid-August, but the snow was ice-hard on the mountainsides to left and right of the Chichiklik Pass. The small, exhausted caravan came to a halt on the summit, breathing hard, cold in spite of the tremendous muscular exertion entailed by the climb, which had steepened with every hundred yards achieved since they had left behind them the last of the Kirghiz *yurts*. Looking about them, high up on what was almost the roof of the world, they could see a labyrinth of barren, precipitous-sided valleys branching off in all directions, splitting the crests, criss-crossing one another, filled with scree and enormous boulders where the force of the ice and the weight of winter snow had broken up the rock face. It lay to their right: and they knew it for the Pamirs.

Strictly speaking, perhaps, the Pamirs are not a mountain range so much as an immensely high plateau intersected with deep valleys cut by the movement of vast glaciers during the various Ice Ages that have beset our planet. The bottoms of the valleys themselves are anything from 12,000 to 14,000 feet above sea level—three times the height of the highest mountain peak in the British Isles, Ben Nevis! And these are but the valley bottoms. The crests and ridges that divide one valley from the next rise to 20,000 feet and more, with the peak of

Muztagh Ata towering to 24,388 feet. Here is eternal snow; here are vast ice-fields from which a trickle of water flows downwards during the short season when the sun is strong enough to melt some of the surface ice. Otherwise it is barren country, almost waterless over much of its huge extent for the greater part of the year.

Three countries meet among the Pamirs: Afghanistan, Russian Turkestan, and Chinese Turkestan. Of the eight major peaks, one is in Afghanistan, one, named Taghdumbash, is in Chinese Turkestan, and the remaining six are in Russian Turkestan. And it is in Russian Turkestan that Marco Polo saw, and duly reported, a breed of mountain sheep so strange that eventually they were actually named after him: *Ovis Poli*. *Wild sheep*, he reported seeing, *of great size, whose horns are a good six palms in length.* . .

For once, Marco Polo was inaccurate in what he reported. Perhaps the bitter cold of the Pamirs, when he passed that way in the thirteenth century, was so acute that he did not linger to take careful measurements! Certain it is, though, that the *Ovis Poli* exists, and in large numbers. Hunters in the High Pamirs, in quest of these wild mountain sheep, have found them, killed them, and measured them carefully.



Some of them had spirally-curved horns over six feet long from brow to tip along their corkscrew length, and as thick as a man's leg at the butt! To find the *Ovis Poli* a hunter must be prepared to



Horns of *Ovis Poli*

operate at heights not less than 12,000 feet above sea-level, and often higher still. Only the yak can work at such heights, so the hunter must have yaks available to carry him and his provisions, ammunition, tents and cooking utensils; not to mention the

carcasses of these great sheep if he is lucky enough to come within range of them.

On the summit of the Chichiklik Pass Peter Fleming and Ella Maillart had climbed almost out of Tartary. Almost, but not quite. The frontier lay ahead of them still—several stages ahead—and each stage arduous in the extreme. They led to the highest, the most formidable, of all these great passes, the dreaded Mintaka Pass, at 16,000 feet. On anything except a fairly large-scale map the distance between the two looks nothing at all. But all maps show, in their graded colours, the heights of the ranges between which the trail runs; the heights, too, perhaps, of the intermediate passes. This is an undulating section of the Gilgit Road: a ridge-walk over a roof unmatched except among the Himalaya themselves.

*The Pass of the Thousand Ibex*

THEY came to Tashkurghan, a settlement on the High Pamirs which was the last they would see until they had conquered the Mintaka Pass and dropped down into the Hunza country on the far side, almost within a sniff of their destination. They shed their escort, paying them off with almost the last of their Chinese coin. There was no risk of their losing the trail from this point onwards, for in country as rough and wild as this there was only one trail to take.

Tashkurghan was a good deal lower either than the pass they had left behind them or the one to which they had yet to climb. But they were still on the Gilgit Road—which meant everything. They could not leave it without inviting almost certain death; so long as they kept to it, provided they had the strength and stamina, and their pack-animals did not fall by the wayside, depriving them of their sole means of subsistence, there was a reasonable chance that they would reach their destination—Srinagar.

They were now on that section of the Gilgit Road

that would lead them in due course to "The Pass of the Thousand Ibex". On the map it is simply shown as Mintaka Pass: the frontier between India and Chinese Turkestan. A traveller who passed that way more recently than Peter Fleming and his small caravan referred to it as *a fantastic witches' cauldron of scree, rock, glacier, all thrown up where the mighty ranges of the Karakoram, Hindu Kush, Kunlun Shan and Pamirs bump into one another. The pass itself, he goes on to say, is a gigantic pile of black boulders. Behind this, row upon row of pointed, snow-capped peaks sawing at the blue sky. Rough scree up and down; black boulders; a glacier like a gigantic plough at the end of the screes; deep and dark gorges; glistening white distance where snow contrasted with blackness of shadow in clefts; pitch-black gullies. Karakoram, he ends, means "Black Mountains", an even better name would be "Mountains of Stillness and Death".*

No wheeled vehicles have ever been known to traverse this winding mountain trail over Chichiklik Pass, over Mintaka Pass, between Kashgar and Gilgit. The yak can manage it. A few ponies have managed the easier side. Where the gradients are stiffest, often a load has to be divided and humped by men; particularly when there is snow in the ravines and every step must be felt for with a stick and

progress is possible only by moving from boulder to precariously perched boulder.

There are native carriers on this Gilgit Road known as *dak* runners, whose task it is to carry the mail and official communications northwards out of Kashmir, through the Hunza country, into Chinese Turkestan; and then back again. On their feet they wear what are locally known as the Kashmiri grass shoe, which has proved better than anything else—at least for a native—over rough country when snow lies on it. This is a sort of sandal of twisted and plaited rice-straw, with a grass rope threaded between the big toe and the four other toes and looped over the instep. The native will wear this over bare feet; the European, if he is prepared to sink his pride and wear it at all, will probably wear several pairs of socks inside it.

A *dak* runner, travelling light, travels fast. He is a "tiger", in the same class as the hand-picked Sherpas who accompany the Westerners' Himalayan expeditions and claim this title when they have proved their worth and ability at great altitudes. But coolies, too, humping loads of sixty pounds and more on their backs, can cover great distances even on this mountainous trail. One device they have in use helps to account for their ability to carry such huge loads over

distances so great. This is a "T"-shaped stick, cut to an appropriate length. Each coolie carries one. And at intervals he stops, leans backwards in such a way that the cross-piece of his stick takes the weight from his shoulders, and thus recoups his strength in readiness



Mountain-trail coolies with "T"-sticks

for the next stage of his journey. It also enables him to avoid the strain of off-loading and reloading each time he has a brief halt.

Peter Fleming and Ella Maillart neared the Mintaka Pass. Behind them soared the great Chichiklik, appearing even higher than it was as they descended

the rough slope that was so soon to rise again, southwards, to the frontier with India.

It was still August, but snow fell at intervals. They thought, as they plodded onwards and upwards, of the tales told at the halting-places by men who had traversed the Gilgit Road many times in their lives: tales of sudden, unseasonable avalanches; of ice in unexpected places; of single *dak* runners, parties of carriers, and even sizeable caravans, being overwhelmed by soft snow flooding down upon them from great crags out of sight far above their heads. It was traditional, they knew, to travel the Gilgit Road as much as possible at night time, in the very early morning at latest, before the strengthening sun had had time to melt the frozen snow on the upper slopes and precipitate it downwards to destroy everything that lay in its path.

The cold on this stretch of the Pamirs is terrible. Without a fire, a man may well die. There is no timber growing; not even any scrub. So every coolie, every carrier, every *dak* runner, carries with him, in addition to the load he is paid to carry, a small supply of brushwood, often just a few sprays of juniper, so that he can light himself a small fire, crouch over it awhile, and with luck escape being frozen to death.

There was, Peter Fleming found, something

beautiful, as well as terrible, about the Mintaka Pass. He noted the falling snow. He noted the skeletons of animals that had struggled to the pass, and then died there of utter exhaustion just when the downward grade was about to begin. He noted the bloodstains on the smooth-faced boulders—bloodstains that became more and more frequent, more and more widespread, as the last furlongs of the zigzagging trail approached the pass itself. These, he knew, were signs of the humanitarian instincts of the drivers of the pack-animals, who let their blood to ease their breathing and relieve the pressure in their veins at this great altitude. All these were ugly things, though inescapable.

But he noted, too, much that was beautiful: a flight of snow-partridges that swept across the actual pass, wheeling in the snow-filled sky as though in sheer joy and pride at being mobile where all else was struggling to move laboriously along a hard, stony trail, or had been brought to a standstill. Two small birds, that looked to him like a pair of red-starts, were chatting animatedly together amid a tumble of small rocks. The sheer beauty of the moving wall of snow that was sweeping across the vast emptiness of the valleys between peak and mountain peak, linking the Pamirs to the Karakorams.



He stood there, as travellers before him must have done, and others after him may yet do—unless men lose all their zest for tackling arduous journeys and go soft, preferring the valleys and mechanically-propelled vehicles to the use of muscles given to them by God to show what Man can do when he wishes. He stood there and looked about him, striving to pierce the thinly falling snow, grateful that, momentarily at any rate, the vicious wind had eased a little. Behind him lay all of Chinese Turkestan, Sinkiang—what had once been called Tartary: the vast expanse of the cruel Tarim Basin, the bitter, inhospitable, implacable Takla Makan, the dominating Kunlun Shan and the mountain trails through the Nan Shan this side of Sining and Lanchow which they had followed for so long, so painfully, and with such determination.

In a moment or two he would be stepping out of Tartary altogether. He would choose his moment, for the dividing-line lay straight across the trail as it breasted the Mintaka Pass: on this side of it, he was still in Tartary; when he set his foot over it, even by half an inch, he would have stepped over the Pass of the Thousand Ibex—and would be in India.

He did not hurry. Instead, he lit a pipe and sat

down, his back against a rock, savouring the moment. For it is at moments like these that all true travellers like to pause, as though to allow the moment to imprint itself on the retina of the memory so that it can be evoked later on, as a precious experience that can never be exactly repeated.

He was not, truly, at the end of his journey; but he was nearing it. From now onwards, though the mountain trail would continue to be severe and exacting, it would on the whole lead downhill. There would be more mountain passes, but none of them again would be as high as those already conquered. The Burzil Pass was a mere 13,775 feet, according to his map, though others who had passed that way had given warning that it was severe whichever way one approached it. The Tragbal Pass, further on the way to Srinagar, was a mere 11,560 feet—a trifle compared with the giants already encountered and dealt with!

There would, he knew, be cold: glacier-tongues descended close to the trail, and the wind that passed over them picked up some of their ice-cold and deposited it on travellers foolhardy enough to take a mountain trail which was by rights the territory of wind and ice and snow. There would be a rocky track hewn out from the mountainside, with a sheer drop

of anything up to a thousand feet on its open side. There would be rock-falls over which a beast, however sure-footed, might stumble, flinging its rider over its head so that he met his death on some jutting crag far, far below.

But—there would be no more desert!

The limitless leagues of the desert lay behind them, now; and for that Peter Fleming was thankful indeed. They were better to think about in retrospect than to endure at the time, or even to contemplate! So much of Tartary was desert. All travellers through it for two thousand five hundred years had had to contend with it, for the Silk Road ran east-west through it and it was a trail all travellers must take, whether they journeyed for pleasure or—as the vast majority did—for business.

The moment a traveller will remember longer, perhaps, than those many periods of hardship and danger he has endured is the moment when he takes a tiny step. We can imagine Peter Fleming standing up and knocking out his pipe against a rough stone on the side of the trail that had brought him to the Mintaka Pass. More than three thousand miles lay behind him; something like seven months of continuous, exhausting travel. Perhaps, as he now deliberately set his foot over the dividing-line, he

reminded himself of the proverb minted by the Chinese people, those great overlanders whose territory he was now leaving behind him: "The longest journey starts with but a single step."





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